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# MIKE SHAYNE



## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Mike Shayne Thriller  
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by Brett Halliday

A Suspenseful Novelet  
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# MIKE SHAYNE

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### HELLHOLE

by Brett Halliday

*It was like a nightmare, but Mike Shayne knew without a doubt that it was very real. He was responsible for the deaths of the Alpha Squad, of the electrocution of Will Gentry — and of the killing of his secretary Lucy Hamilton and his best friend Tim Rourke! . . . . . 4*

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*Shayne couldn't believe his eyes: sitting on the couch, their arms around each other, were Lucy and his best friend, Tim Rourke. He snaked the Smith and Wesson from behind his jacket and fired. Lucy took the first slug just above the lacy cut of her negligee. The second bullet went through Tim's forehead!*

# Hellhole

by BRETT HALLIDAY

FEELING TOTALLY SAPPED, MIKE SHAYNE PROPPED HIMSELF up against the Beef House's new formica bar. He was alone except for the bartender, who seemed extremely distant tonight.

"Hey, Pat," he called out, "bring me a brew. I can't seem to get this salty taste out of my mouth."

Mechanically, the Irish bartender handed the big detective a tall draft on a napkin and disappeared. Shayne was disappointed. The beer was warm and flat and smelled like a colostomy ward. About to call for another draft, the redhead glanced down at the cocktail napkin.

Just under the Budweiser eagle, Shayne's eye caught some scribbling done in now-running ink. Straightening the soggy tissue with his fingers, the detective read the smeared message: "The first in the alphabet will be the first to die."

Shayne blinked his eyes. The message was still there. First in the alphabet, first to die, thought Shayne. What could it mean? Who wrote it? Who would die? "Pat," he said loudly.

The bartender appeared as if conjured by a spell from the Magic City detective. Shayne held up the napkin, which was moist from the sweating glass. "Did you write this?"

Pat shook his head as if to ask "Is this some kind of joke?" and walked away.

Shayne was puzzled. Then he looked over the bar. There beside the old-fashioned cash register and below the famous team of Clydesdales was the large calendar Pat always kept filled with the big sporting events of the month.

Today was April 1st.

Shayne chuckled to himself. Leave it to Pat. That oversized leprechaun had probably been waiting all day to have his fun. But then why hadn't Pat laughed when his redhaired April fool had gone for the bait?

Instinctively Shayne glanced down at the napkin. The ink had continued to run so that the napkin now resembled a crazy-quilt cobweb.

The phone at the end of the bar rang. When Pat failed to appear, Shayne reached over and picked up the receiver.

"Shayne," said the faintly familiar voice on the other end.

Startled, the redhead didn't answer.

"Shayne, this is Don Flynn," continued the voice. "Flash, Mad Dog, Tom-Tom, and I are back in town."

It was Alpha Squad. What a coincidence, decided the detective. The last time he had seen Flynn and the other Vietnam veterans they had been in this same room in the Beef House. It was just after their harrowing battle with their old nemesis, Ho Lu. It had been the best of times, the worst of times. Shayne had made some good friends — and in his business good friends — hell, any friends — came along about as often as a Pick-Six winner at Calder. On the other hand, several of the squad members had been killed, and Ho Lu had escaped, minus his left hand — courtesy of Mike Shayne.

The telephone interrupted Shayne's reverie. "We're here near Bear Cut. Come on out. A few suds, some clams, a lotta talk — hell, Shayne, it don't get no better than that."

Before the big redhead could respond, the receiver clicked. He was tired, really dragging. Almost any other time he would have enjoyed

the reunion, but right now he felt like a long, hot shower, a cold Martell, and a soft sack.

Shayne pulled a bill from his pocket and flipped it toward the still-full glass of beer. Like a feather it softly floated downward, coming to rest on the crumpled napkin.

The redhead turned and bolted for the door. "The first in the alphabet will be the first to die," the message had said. Maybe it was just a joke and he would end up the fool, but he wasn't about to take that chance.

The first in the alphabet — Alpha Squad!

THE HEAT WAVES RISING FROM THE BLACKTOP OF RICKENBACKER Causeway distorted the redhead's vision. Over the Buick's nose the palm trees on Key Biscayne shimmered in the damp, heavy air of dusk. Even unloosening his tie and rolling up his sleeves offered little relief. Shayne had felt drier when he used to go with old Jake L'Argot into the Turkish baths.

He passed a restaurant and a beach where all the Hoby-cats were landing. As his eyes scanned the nearly-empty Marine Stadium parking lot, he wondered how in hell he was going to find Alpha Squad. The Bear Cut area was huge. The island in the twilight seemed an appropriate place for a reunion. If it weren't for the litter cans and road signs, he could very well have imagined he was on the outskirts of a Vietnam jungle.

As Planet Ocean, the scientific seaquarium, appeared on the distant left, he kept his eyes out for a sign from the four guys. Shayne was basically a lone wolf, but he had enjoyed the company of the vets. Like him they were pragmatists. They didn't lie back and let others solve their problems. They jumped in with both feet, and if the solution meant kicking a little ass, then so be it.

Their trail marker, just across the bridge from Planet Ocean, was hard to miss. A huge white sign with an arrow under Alpha Squad stood out among the parked cars. Shayne pulled over beside a purple van and got out.

The hot wind off the bay smacked him in the face, and he took out a handkerchief to try to dry himself. He pushed down toward the sandy dirt beach.

The darkness had slipped up on him like an intruder. The night sky was partially lit by a glow from the city, and with fires starting to spring up along the beach he could just make out where he was going.

Something inside pushed him on. Why he felt such an urgency to find his friends he couldn't rationally explain, but he knew he had to.

What had the four of them been up to since they had parted company? Flash Rainey probably found it a relief to track down spare parts rather than an assassin, and Tom-Tom Baker found Chi more to his liking than Miami. Mad Dog Boyd was probably in peak condition from training with his own security company, and Don Flynn, the owner of a fastfood restaurant, had doubtless busied himself with the danger of blowing up Ronald McDonald balloons.

As he came upon the beach, he spotted the four men. Standing in front of leaping flames, the quartet appeared ghost-like, spectres dancing a foot above the ground. One of them spotted Shayne, and as though in slow motion they began to wave him on.

Shayne broke into a trot. The wet sand sucked on his loafers, making quick progress impossible. He yelled, but they didn't seem able to hear him.

The whistling sound came from behind. As it arced forward, he knew he had heard it before.

He stopped and started motioning at them to get down. They began to mimic him — laughing.

The fireball erupted exactly where they were standing. The sudden light was blinding, and the shock waves knocked the big detective to his knees.

When he finally arrived at the spot of the explosion, he found nothing but a dark crater.

*The first in the alphabet* spun through his mind. The first in the alphabet had been the first to die.

## II

SHAYNE FOUND HIMSELF BACK AT HIS APARTMENT HOTEL sitting motionlessly and noiselessly in the dark. Somehow he had managed to exchange one black hole for another. His head throbbed, and his mouth was dry and salty. The clammy night air closed in on him.

He didn't have to close his eyes to see the four burning figures. Like skeletons with auras of light surrounding them, they pleaded for help, and their screams mingled with a high-pitched whistle.

He was responsible. He knew it as well as he knew that the sun would rise in the morning. He might as well have launched the mortar shell himself.

The darkness of his living room seemed a cage. The shades were



tightly drawn and not a single shaft of light pierced the blackness. Alpha Squad had been killed because of him. Why else would he have received a message? He mentally kicked himself for ever thinking the whole thing had been a joke. Four murdered men were not his idea of black humor.

Shayne tried to piece together a scenario. Someone had sent him a message, a not-too-cryptic one he could easily decipher. Somehow that someone knew that the vets were back in town and they would call him at his favorite watering hole, The Beef House. He hadn't noticed any customers in the bar, but how difficult was it, with Pat out of the room, to slip him a note? That someone then had used him as a bloodhound and had followed him to the beach.

The rest was bloody history, and that someone owed Mike Shayne a final chapter.

Why would anybody want to kill Alpha Squad? Who would? A thought swooped in over the edge of his consciousness. Was somebody playing mindgames with him? Was the killing of Alpha Squad a brutal way to make him suffer? Who would try such a thing?

Shayne admitted to himself that a list of his enemies would rival those who owed money to Bennie the Book. The everyday cruds he flushed down Miami's sewer system were never that cerebral. A mindgame to the city's crime overlord of the moment, Dominic Ferrari, was a heavy crowbar to the head. And the other maggots were even less subtle.

The redhead had a strange urge for a smoke. He groped around the darkness, but was unable to find the Camels. If anybody in town knew what was going down those mean streets of Miami, it was his old friend Will Gentry.

In the dark he dialed the familiar but unlisted Bal Harbour number of the Miami police chief. Gentry wasn't at home, but his wife said he could be reached at the Buccaneer Hotel where he was the guest speaker at a banquet for some law-enforcement organization.

SHAYNE STARTED TO SLIDE ACROSS THE BUICK'S FRONT seat. A wad of yellow paper the size of a golf ball with rubber bands around it lay on the passenger side. He picked it up. It was heavier than he expected. Perhaps it had been weighted so someone in a hurry could toss it through the window from a passing car.

If all the years of investigating had taught him anything, it was you didn't just rip things open. Carefully he unwrapped the paper. Inside



was a silver dollar, the eagle shining in the glow from a streetlight. He spread the yellow sheet out on the seat. This time the handwriting on the paper was clear: YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO A PIG ROAST.

The dark thought that had been circling his consciousness landed. Not again — not Will Gentry.

EVERY LIGHT WAS RED, AND THE TRAFFIC ACROSS MAC-Arthur Causeway would have lost a race to a crippled snail. Maybe it was the lack of food, maybe it was the tension of the moment, but his stomach churned like Biscayne Bay in a hurricane.

Some kind of sicko was playing games with Mike Shayne's friends as the pieces, and the big detective didn't like games — especially when somebody else was making the rules and destroying the pieces.

To hell with it. He hit the Buick's horn and the shoulder. He was moving so fast he didn't dare look away to the speedometer. Cars and lightposts whizzed by his window in blurred shapes and colors as he headed up Collins Avenue.

Before he knew it, Shayne was sliding into the front entrance of the Buccaneer Hotel with its WELCOME POLICE marquee. He didn't wait for valet service and paid no attention to the security guards who yelled that he couldn't leave his car there.

figure blocked the doorway. The diminutive man in a tailored tuxedo stood erect, his hand caressing a long cigarette holder effeminately. Miami Beach's Chief of Police looked more like an Italian film director than Shayne's worst enemy.

His free hand popped the redhead in the chest with surprising strength. "Hold it, Shayne," said Peter Painter. "This is a gathering of *real* policemen."

"Then," said Shayne, "I can see why you're standing outside."

Painter remained impassive. Usually Shayne's barbs had an instant effect on his mustached adversary. But this shot elicited no more response than that of a Buckingham Palace guard.

"Look, Petey, I've got to get in there fast. Move out of the way or I'm going through you."

"Tut, tut, big fellow," said the tiny martinet. "Everything you do you act as though the entire world is poised on the edge of Armageddon."

"Move it, Petey," repeated the big detective.

As Painter's finger traced the outline of his pencil-thin mustache,

Shayne noticed a peculiar tinge to the Police Chief's complexion, almost as though he were jaundiced. And his eyes seemed stretched at the edges like a face-lift gone bad.

Shayne couldn't argue. With a single motion he picked up the tuxedoed roadblock and threw him into one of the hotel's overstuffed couches.

Shayne ripped open the double doors. At what seemed a mile away the dais rose up at the opposite end of the ballroom. The formally dressed figure of Will Gentry was getting up from behind the head table. The police chief headed toward the podium.

"Will," Shayne called as he bolted down the center aisle. At first nobody seemed to notice. Then, as if on cue, the crowd rose around the detective. He knocked them aside as if they were bowling pins. But there were too many. He had to get to Gentry. The hands clutched, and everywhere faces screamed at him, screamed like a whistling rocket.

The yellow note flashed into his brain as the redhead watched Gentry continue toward the podium. Only a few more feet for the police chief. The redhead slashed the hands aside. He knew what the message said.

Will Gentry was the pig and he was about to get roasted.

"Will," screamed Shayne, "not the microphone."

The burly police chief stepped behind the podium, and with a huge smile on his face reached out to adjust the microphone's position.

"No," yelled the redhead as he was buried beneath flesh.

Looking up he caught a glimpse of what happened, in fragments as though he were watching a broken film.

As his good friend made contact with the metal, he began to tremble as though some minor tremor had caught him. Then he screamed, his eyes seeming to bulge from his head and to come directly toward Shayne. His body grew rigid, and sparks emerged from his hand in a grotesque fireworks display.

Then mercifully the "pig roast" was over.

### III

AS HE SPIRALED UP OUT OF THE DARKNESS, SHAYNE FELT the dull film covering his brain. They must have given him a sedative to calm him down after what had happened. The redhead had never been one for drugs, not even aspirin for a headache, so whatever had been administered must have really knocked him for a loop.

The redhead's mind was like a sieve, unable to hold a thought for even a moment. How long had he been out? How had he gotten back to

his apartment? What time was it? In fact, what day? The answers had already slipped through on the way to oblivion.

Slowly Shayne pulled himself up from his bed. His arms were weary and his legs rubbery. He was soaking wet, as though he had taken a shower with his clothes on. What was happening to him? If somebody was playing with his brain, they were professional.

It was all raining down on him. First Alpha Squad, now Will Gentry. They were all gone, and each one had met a violent death at which he had been witness. Yeah, there was no doubt about it. He was the pivotal point, the center of gravity around whom the whole thing spun.

Why?

The question darted at him like a bird of prey. It was one thing to make Mike Shayne a target, but when five men died for the simple reason they had been his friends, somebody had to pay. For that injustice he had an I.O.U. signed in blood.

What next?

He tried to cross the room, but he was like an infant learning to walk. The darkness overwhelmed him, smothered him. He staggered to the window. Closed. The humidity was worse. He threw aside the curtains, ripping cobwebs loose from the window panes. He'd have to get on his housekeeper about that.

The shade flew up with a suddenness that surprised him and exploded against the top of the jamb. He couldn't trust his senses. Slowly he forced open the latch and pushed the window up.

The wind off the bay swept into his face. The city below his apartment looked like a smeared painting, and the pre-dawn streets were quiet.

The billboard across the street caught his eye. Yellow light flickered at him. The billboard was an advertisement for the Dolphins' next home game — against Philadelphia. Two giants, one with a fish on his helmet and the other with eagle wings, glowered at each other. Something drew his attention above the time and date. In a golden, luminous swath, someone had spraypainted a message across the Eagles' winged helmet: DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR LADY IS TONIGHT?

Oh my god, thought Shayne. Five was not enough. The killing was going to continue.

And the next victim was Lucy Hamilton.

SOMEHOW SHAYNE GOT HIMSELF INTO THE BUICK AND heading toward his beautiful secretary's apartment. In his entire lifetime only two women had ever stirred Shayne's deepest emotions, and now only one was alive.

But for how long?

He had tried to phone her apartment, but the call had not gone through. Rather than argue or try to get the police, he had decided to handle it himself. This time he wasn't going to be too late. Poor Lucy was probably sleeping like a baby. Sure, she knew working for him wasn't the safest job in the world, but every time she had ever gotten into trouble, he had been there to bail her out. She expected it, and with that security came a certain vulnerability. Why hadn't he called her when this night had first started to unravel? Now there was so little time left.

But Lucy Hamilton. In her entire life Shayne doubted she had ever done anything to hurt anybody. If truly nature's innocents existed, then she was one.

The Buick glided between two black cars and swung off Biscayne Boulevard. In less than five minutes he was there. He hit the stairs in his unsteady run, but the steps seemed like an escalator running against him. On the second floor he started to hear a soft, Southern accent that flowed smooth as corn syrup.

It was Lucy. Her voice was steady and calm. He couldn't pick out the words, but he could tell from her tone that she wasn't nervous. Thank god, he was on time.

He started to knock when he made out her words for the first time. "Don't go," she was saying. "The time doesn't matter. I can stay up all night with you."

Who was she talking to?

"I know I'm not Mike," came an indistinct, masculine voice.

"No," she said assuringly, "but you're here."

Shayne froze at the door.

"I shouldn't be doing this," said the man.

"Why not?" said Lucy. "I need you. I can never count on Michael. If he shows up at all for one of our dates, I spend the entire evening listening to the gruesome details of how *he's* doing on one of *his* cases. I can't live like that forever."

"I can understand. You're not the only one he uses."

Guilt mixed with anger simmered in the redhead.

Lucy continued, "The thing that hurts me the most is that his whole life is centered on himself."

"He lives in a private war zone, and he allows nobody to break his perimeters. How often when he's gone have you waited by the phone for the call in the middle of the night saying 'He's fired his .38 for the last time'? You deserve better than that, Angel."

Shayne's Irish temper exploded at the same time as Lucy Hamilton's door.

The redhead couldn't believe his eyes.

Sitting on the couch in the dim light, their arms around each other, were Lucy and his best friend, Tim Rourke.

"Michael," she said in surprise.

"Shamus," gasped the reporter. "I can explain."

Shayne watched helplessly as his hand, acting on its own, reached behind his back and reappeared with the familiar Smith & Wesson. Saw the hammer cock. Felt the four ounces of pressure against his finger. Heard the bullet separate from its jacket.

Lucy took the first slug just above the lacy cut of her negligee. The second bullet went through Tim Rourke's open palms on the way to his forehead.

Shayne collapsed before he saw the results of the other four blasts.

#### IV

SHAYNE WISHED IT HAD ALL BEEN A DREAM, BUT HIS SURROUNDINGS offered stark evidence it had not been. The cold cement walls broken only by a door lined with bars were filled with scribbled names and dates of men who had been previously caged there.

The big detective looked down at his fingertips. The telltale ink smears showed he had indeed been printed before being booked and locked up. He felt for his belt — it had been taken. Even his pockets were empty.

He was alone.

Shayne scraped his broken thumbnail across the thick, red stubble on his chin. Through swollen eyes he could barely make out the shattered remnants of a light bulb dangling above him. He struggled to his feet and felt his way around the darkened room. The cell was about six by nine feet with a solid metal door.

Suddenly a light broke through the barred opening in the door, causing Shayne's eyes to contract violently. When he pulled his hands in front of his face, he could see they were shaking.

Then again darkness.

Shayne fought to remember the long night. Only one image came through with clarity. Seven faces, like seven petals on a wet, black bough, screamed in agony from the hell to which Shayne had sentenced them.

The heavy metal thud in the distance was the first sound he had heard. It was like a hammer striking an anvil next to his ear. Someone was outside the door.

The metal plate swung open slowly. From his bunk Shayne looked up at the mammoth figure in a guard uniform. On his shoulder was the familiar patch of the Miami Beach Police Department. The figure ignored Shayne's presence as he removed the broken bulb and screwed in another. The result was blinding. Shayne covered his eyes from the miniature sun in his cell.

"Shayne," came a voice from behind the guard, "I've always said that one day you'd go too far and I'd be there to make you pay."

It was Peter Painter.

The mustached martinet continued. "Two counts of Murder One. You found at the scene. The murder weapon in your possession. Congratulations, Shayne. You'll be Florida's first contribution to the chair in years. And I assure you, I'm going to shepherd you all the way from this cell to the grave."

"What happened?" said Shayne.

Painter drew deeply on his long cigarette holder. "To put it in the vernacular, you finally went over the edge — bonkers, nuts, funny farm. As my father was fond of noting, 'One who lies down with dogs can expect to rise with fleas.'"

Shayne stared at the Chief's yellow-tinged features. If Painter looked so drawn in the face, the detective wondered how *he* must look.

Making a quick decision, Shayne lowered his shoulder and stumbled forward. Like a matador the Police Chief stepped deftly aside, and Shayne's head rammed the metal door. He dropped to his knees, then fell prostrate on the cement floor. Painter kicked the defenseless detective in the kidneys and the head — again and again.

Then mercifully, darkness.

SHAYNE'S EYELIDS FLUTTERED. HE RUBBED HIS EYES. THE longest night of his life was getting longer. From the first moment he found himself at the Beef House he had been disoriented, unable to gain control of his situation. Was this what it was like to go over the

edge? Was Painter right about him?

He needed a focal point, a fixed reference, something solid to grab to pull himself out of this dark hole into which he seemed to be slipping ever more deeply. He scanned the wall across from his soggy, mildewed mattress. A large calendar that he hadn't noticed before hung on a rusty nail driven into the cracked cement.

There was a picture on the calendar. It was one of those realistic wildlife scenes of which Lucy had been so fond. Lucy. His stomach got a burning sensation as if a vat of acid had been poured down his throat.

At the top of the picture a huge creature stood out. Shayne sat up rigidly.

The eagle was perched on a dead stump. Its eyes seemed fixed on the detective. He couldn't escape its stare.

He moved to the right. The bird's stare followed. It was almost as if the creature were alive.

Was he moving toward the bird or was it getting bigger? The room seemed to grow hotter and more humid.

The eagle. Something important about the eagle.

The bird began to flap its wings, driving the warm, moist air into Shayne's face. Then it was screeching, a high-pitched scream almost like a whistle. Talons bared and beak open, it attacked.

Shayne cowered on the cot, covering himself up in the fetal position.

The eagle struck viciously.

"Carmen," he screamed. "Carmen Aguila."

## V

SHAYNE WAS FIGHTING, FIGHTING AS HE NEVER HAD IN HIS life. Eagle feathers in his face. The eagle. What did it mean? The American eagle . . . the eagle has landed . . . eagle scout . . . eagles on dollars . . . the seal of the United States . . . Philadelphia Eagles . . . Budweiser beer . . . the double eagle . . . eagle eyes . . . endangered species.

Ever since the Beef House, everything that had come up had involved an eagle. The napkin, the dollar, the football billboard, even a calendar. But why the eagle? So many eagles, more in one night than in the rest of his life. Too many. Something was really wrong, or was it something wrong with the real?

The real. Nothing was real. The officer who had changed the light bulb. What did the patch on his shoulder say? Miami, no, Miami Beach Police Department.



That was it. Why was he in jail in Miami Beach when his crime had taken place in Miami? And Painter. Sure Petey hated his guts, but he wouldn't kick them — Petey always went by the book.

His car. Nobody could have thrown a message through the Buick's window from a passing car. He always parked in the hotel's garage to protect it.

The Beef House. It was never empty, and Pat in his entire life had never been so tight-lipped. And the phone call. Flynn had known it was him before he had said anything.

The constants struck him. From his first recollection the night had been a continuous series of awakenings and blackouts. There was no continuity, no thread to pull them together. Darkness and light, then darkness. And wetness. Everything was wet — the mattress, the bed, his clothes, the walls, the glass. The salty taste in his mouth, even now. The heat. Miami wasn't that hot or that humid at night.

Mindgames. Shayne remembered his thoughts about mindgames. Somebody was kicking around reality, and his head was their football.

The eagle had disappeared. Of course it had. It had never existed. What else, he wondered, had never happened? Was everything some kind of hallucination, dream — nightmare?

But why him? How?

He heard himself screaming. The name echoed off the soft, fuzzy walls of his mind. Psychological racquetball. The name — it was the only thing that didn't fit into the whole string of incidents involving the loss of close friends.

The name — Carmen Aguila. Why had he screamed the name of his Cuban housekeeper? He fixed on the name. Aguila. Aguila was Spanish for eagle. There was a tie. Just before every death the eagle had delivered a message. What was Carmen Aguila trying to tell him?

Every Friday morning at 7:00 he awoke to the sounds of "*Buenos dias, Senor Shayne*" and the high pitched whistle of her vacuum cleaner. In his whole world there were two things he could count on — taxes and that machine's broken whine.

For the first time Shayne was conscious of, felt the water. The concentration, the thinking had altered his consciousness. He was really in water. Water was all around him. He couldn't see a thing, but he could feel the water.

He listened — nothing. Shayne had always depended on his highly developed senses, figuring they stood between him and death in his business, but right now the only sense functioning seemed to be touch.

He was floating, literally suspended on water. "To control the mind is to control the man," his martial arts sensei had said. The body is a vessel, a tool shaped and controlled by the mind.

Shayne, mustering all his concentration into a single supreme effort, pictured something simple, his own right hand. Focused on the gnarled fingers that had been broken so many times. Saw the scars that cross-stitched the back of his tanned hand.

With as much effort as he had ever put behind a punch, he willed movement. He felt his index finger curl. Then he wiggled it. Coolness, air, a different medium. He flicked the finger. A splash. Then another. A single drop of water sounded like a .45 exploding next to his ear.

He moved a second finger, then another. His hand rose up out of its watery prison.

Slowly and with much agony Shayne gained control of his body, his senses — all but sight.

He rocked his body side to side as if on a hammock. His fingers struck metal. He was in some kind of metal box.

He shouted. The "hey" reverberated, splitting his eardrums. His senses were acute.

Shayne tried to swing his feet beneath him to get his balance. Momentarily he bobbed. Then he got a mouthful of water. The salt. The taste in his nightmare.

He tried to put the entire picture together. Somebody had put him in a waterfilled tank and had somehow caused him to hallucinate.

He moved his arms to keep from going under. His muscles responded slowly, just the opposite of his senses. He bobbed and again tasted salt water.

How had he gotten here? How long had he been held captive? Try though he might, he could not remember a single thing.

Somewhere in those hideous, induced dreams lay the answer.

He had to get out. He felt along the metal surface for a door, a latch, a crack.

Nothing.

Without warning the sound of metal against metal thundered out as though it were a sonic boom. Then bright light struck his eyes, momentarily blinding the detective.

"You didn't think I'd forget you, Mr. Shayne," said a heavily accented voice from behind the light.

Shayne blinked trying to focus on his captor. Instinctively he brought his right hand to his eyes. The salt water burned. "Damn you," said

the redhead. Slowly the imposing shape above him came into focus.

He recognized the smiling, yellowed face, and it wasn't Petey Painter.

## VI

"HO LU, YOU BASTARD," SPAT OUT SHAYNE.

"Is that how you greet an old friend?" Ho Lu's laugh sounded like a maniacal cackle.

Shayne's ears, which had been denied any sound for so long, screamed in pain. The Oriental continued his laugh as the redhead tried to cover his ears and stay afloat. In the back of his mind Shayne recalled the distorted image in his hallucination. Something in his subconscious had been trying to tell him who his real enemy was by the jaundiced coloring and slitted eyes of Petey Painter.

The big detective reached up for the door frame, and a steel heel mashed his fingers. He winced at the acute pain.

"You have my congratulations, Mr. Shayne," said the Oriental. "In all the scholarly journals, in all the tales professionals tell, no one has ever stayed isolated in one of those chambers for more than a few hours without totally losing a sense of reality. You, however, have been in my little swimming pool for over twelve hours, and all my sensors tell me that somehow you have managed to maintain a grip on reality."

For the first time Shayne was conscious of wired electrodes that seemed to grow from his head and chest. He ripped those loose in a show of defiance, knowing all the while how close he had come to believing the hallucinations. "Mike Shayne," he said, "is nobody's puppet, you maggot."

"Very well. You might have won round one, but as you know, a battle between heavyweights is scheduled for fifteen rounds — assuming that both can stay on their feet."

The laugh which seemed on the verge of a growl told Shayne that his captor didn't plan on the big redhead going the distance. "Funny," said Shayne, "I always pictured a hellhole being filled with fire and brimstone, not water."

"One of your Occidental poets, John Milton, put it thus: 'The mind can make a hell of heaven, a heaven of hell.'"

Treading water, Shayne said, "What is this contraption?"

In a white silk shirt and white flannel pants, Ho Lu sat down in a chair above the detective. Then he clapped his white-gloved hands. A man who reminded Shayne of an Oriental waiter appeared. "Qwak Li, you may turn off the recording equipment. Mr. Shayne has called off

this session. And, Qwak Li, bring me my favorite pipe."

THE REDHEAD COULDN'T HELP BUT STARE AT THE GLOVED right hand. In his last encounter with the lethal Ho Lu, Shayne had cut off the Oriental's right hand in the midst of a life and death struggle. Shayne recalled two things about his fight with the superb ninja: Ho Lu's severed member had looked more like a wolf's paw than a human hand, and at the end of the fight he could have sworn he saw not a man, but a wolf silhouetted against the full moon limp into the darkness. Ho Lu, he had learned, meant He-Wolf.

"When I studied with the priests," said his captor, "at the Temple of Lupus in the mountains of Vietnam, it was ordained that at precisely midnight during the period of the full moon the most favored priests would be granted access to the Chambers of Aquameditation. As a novitiate, one fled from my father's native land, how I envied the masters that privilege."

"Envy?" said Shayne.

"Most certainly. There was one priest in particular who had seen one hundred and forty summers come and go. When he, who had devoted much time to the ritual, would immerse his enfeebled frame in the Chamber's salt-scented isolation, it was rumored that his warrior spirit would leave his broken body to run the highlands with our brother the wolf."

Shayne had heard stories about Eastern mystics and their abilities to project their spirits out of their bodies, but until now he had always discounted such tales. His world had always been one of concrete pavement and lead slugs. Such stuff as Ho Lu had described was nonsense, wasn't it?

"I would sneak into the chamber," continued his captor, "and watch the ancient one achieve his spiritual potential. Though our order was savage, so savage that it had been outlawed in its native land, I did not fully appreciate the depths of that savagery until one morning after the old one achieved his perfect meditative state. Venturing into the surrounding village, I found the Montagnard's women wailing for lost men. They told of attacks during the night by a pack led by a huge, snow-white wolf. Even today in your VA hospitals, how many veterans are labelled mentally unbalanced when their doctors hear tales of a patrol decimated not by Vietnamese bullets or punji sticks, but by packs of wolves. During that war, your General Westmoreland even declared a certain area around our temple more off-limits than the

Chinese border."

"If we're going to sit around the campfire and swap ghost stories," quipped the redhead, "do you think Qwak Li could bring us some marshmallows to toast?"

"That you can joke in the face of certain death reinforces my estimate from these tests that your will to survive is the strongest I have yet encountered in Western civilization," said Ho Lu. "In my days at the temple I began to see other possibilities for what the priests were doing in the chamber. Used properly, for instance, this tank that so honed men's senses could be used to deprive them of same."

Shayne remembered reading a long time ago about experiments done by the Red Chinese involving sensory deprivation. Such "brain-washing" as the Communists called it was practiced during the Korean War. Later the West had experimented with the technique but never really explored its potential because of the ethical questions it raised.

"*Hai nao*, to wash the brain, has been practiced for years by my friends in Peking," said Ho Lu, taking a small, delicately carved pipe from his servant. "My modified tank has aluminum walls and is filled with a 10% solution of magnesium sulfate. Though scientists believe that 93 degrees F is the perfect temperature for a floating body to feel minimal gravity, I have found the body temperature of the subject more effective. You might be interested to know that your normal body heat is 98.0 degrees F. Perhaps that explains your vaunted American 'cool.'"

Ho Lu drew deeply on the ivory pipe, held it for a long time in his expanded lungs, and sent up a puff of smoke that reminded Shayne of frosty breath on a rare cold morning.

"Pure opium," said the Oriental in a slowed voice, "is not the white garbage sold on your streets, but an indigo as purple as a king's robe."

Shayne half expected him to break into an Oriental version of "Deep Purple."

PERHAPS IT WAS THE HEAVY AROMA, PERHAPS BEING TIRED of treading water, perhaps his waterlogged brain, but the big detective had a sudden, unsolicited vision of a Friday-morning visit by his housekeeper.

"You know why it is beautiful day today?" said Carmen Aguila, her thick black hair bound by a gold band. "Not because it is Friday, the

end of the week, not because my favorite puppy runs fast at Pompano, but because last night they bring me word of Ramon."

"Who," said a sleepy Shayne, "is Ramon, and who are they?"

"Excuse me," said the plump matron. "Ramon is my favorite, Consuelo's eldest *nino*. The pipeline, that is how we here get messages from our loved ones who remained in Cuba."

"Well, what's the good news?"

"Ramon, who when we fled the homeland was the size of a coconut, has written his grandmama that he has made the Cuban all-star baseball team."

The clanging of metal on metal made Shayne's head feel like the clapper inside a church bell.

"Your mind wanders, Mr. Shayne," said the smiling Ho Lu. "Perhaps you need a little more time by yourself to get your thoughts together."

"Why are you doing this to me?" growled the redhead. "If it's revenge, why not just kill me and be done with it?"

"Kill you," said Ho Lu, "and be done with it so quickly. I should expect such a comment from an American. Your fast-food mentality never allows you to savor the moment, to enjoy every nuance of the taste."

"Twelve hours is long enough to enjoy any feast. Don't make me sit through a long after-dinner speech," said the redhead.

"If someone had deprived you of your strong right hand," said Shayne's captor, holding up his gloved hand, "I assure you that you would enjoy intensely every second of his suffering as I am enjoying yours."

"So it is revenge," said Shayne.

"Vengeance *cordon bleu* the French invaders of our Vietnam learned many years ago."

As if conjured up from the thick smoke that hung around him, a young girl with exquisite Oriental features appeared. Taking the pipe from Ho Lu, she reminded the redhead of Jade, the daughter Ho Lu had mercilessly killed for disobedience when she had helped the detective escape a trap his captor had set earlier.

Shayne's arms grew weary. There was nothing to grasp, and he found himself sinking slowly.

"Poppy learned to swim at six months," said Ho Lu, putting his arm around the beautiful girl. "But she had the advantage of a strong genetic heritage."

His maniacal laugh was abruptly cut off by the slamming of the metal door, which sent Shayne back into the hellish darkness.

## VII

SHAYNE QUICKLY REALIZED HE HAD BEEN EXPENDING TOO much energy, both in treading water and in talking to Ho Lu. He forced himself to relax and stretch out horizontally. His body floated on the heavily salted water.

Somehow he had to get himself out of the dark tank — and fast. The longer he stayed in the water, the less his chances for survival, and if he was anything, he was a survivor. Normally, Shayne recalled of the technique, the subjects in these tanks were fed and removed periodically, but Ho Lu's vengeance would allow neither. Shayne would sink or starve, whichever came first, and all the while he would be tortured by hallucinating images of his friends dying.

Maybe Ho Lu's vengeance, though, was the key to escape. He knew he was being monitored, and he knew Ho Lu wanted him to die slowly.

Shayne took a mouthful of water and began to gasp. "There's no air," he called out. "I can't breathe." His hands slapped the water, the sides of the tank, frantically.

Then his right hand grasped the floating wires he had ripped from his body. He pulled hard, and they snapped loose from the base of the tank.

He was lying on his back, his hands behind his head, when the metal door above him swung open. Shayne dropped his legs under him as Qwak Li stuck his head into the tank.

With a single motion the big detective whipped his hands forward. Like a jump rope the wire came up, over, and around the Oriental's neck.

Shayne yanked as hard as he could with his makeshift garrote.

The servant pitched forward into the tank. Quickly the redhead wound an extra loop of the wire around the floundering figure's throat — and drew tightly.

At first Qwak Li struggled. Surprised and in the water, he couldn't use his martial arts techniques. He spun and twisted, but Shayne held on as though he were riding a bucking bronco.

Then it was over.

Pushing the motionless figure aside, Shayne pulled himself out of the water slowly, the metal facing biting into his swollen fingers. His body a bloated prison of pain and his legs like bananas, he collapsed on



the floor.

After a while he dragged himself to his knees and looked around. He seemed to be in a dimly lit locker room. The tank sat at one end, and at the other a crudely structured control room behind a glass panel. Shayne stared at his skin. He looked like a white prune. Automatically he was massaging his arms and legs, trying to get some circulation and muscle tone back.

He got up to one knee and fell back to the floor. Twelve plus hours had reduced his body to that of a toddler. On a hook he spotted his khaki slacks and dark-blue polo shirt.

Propping himself against the wall, he pulled on his clothes and stuck his feet in his loafers. He felt sluggish as though he had just awakened, and he seemed to be moving in slow motion.

Where was he? He had no recollection of coming to this room. Somewhere overhead he heard a jet pass. There were no windows. He staggered to the only door, which was across the room. He entered the observation room, then through a door in its far end.

He was in a long corridor of white cinderblocks lit only by indirect fluorescence. At either end seemed to be a doorway. Which way to go?

For no reason Shayne went right. Cautiously and noiselessly he crept down the hallway. His mind and body seemed separate and distinct entities. He had to consciously will each step. Everything had to be forced. Like a novice learning a sport, he had to think about every move.

The solid metal door was unlocked. Slowly he opened it and stepped through.

HE FOUND HIMSELF IN A ROOM WHOSE FLOORS AND WALLS were lined with white mats. Directly across from him, standing in front of the room's only other door, was Poppy. Dressed in a red silk robe, she was scarcely five feet tall. As she inched toward him, the teenager smiled demurely like a penitent schoolgirl about to explain to a teacher why she was absent for the big test.

He never saw her right foot move from the floor. All of a sudden it was in his face. He gave, falling backward with the kick, reminding himself to ride with the blow.

As he hit the mat, a back kick whipped past where his head had just been. He continued to roll backward as she came at him with the speed of a mongoose pursuing a snake.

Shayne rolled into a wall mat. Further retreat was impossible.

As he dodged a front kick, he saw an opening coming, cocked his sledgehammer right — and hesitated.

Her kick missed taking off his right ear by a quarter-inch.

Why hadn't he seized the opportunity, he asked himself. He had the chance to deck her as he had so many men, but hadn't taken it. That was just it. She wasn't a him — she wasn't even a woman. She was a teenager, but a very deadly one.

What else should he have expected from one of Ho Lu's pups?

Well, if he could free himself this far, he could make himself hit her.

He blocked a punch with his right forearm, immediately snapping a left at her face. To his surprise she blocked it.

How could someone so small be so powerful, so quick? Had her training included some sort of exotic supplements, perhaps some of her father's priestly techniques to add strength and stamina?

She answered his question with a kick to his ribs. Poppy was circling him. It reminded the redhead of the way occasional rabid dogs in the city would track the street people. Suddenly as though launched from a trampoline, she came soaring bird-like through the air, her lungs screaming at him.

At the last possible second Shayne stepped aside, and despite his depleted strength, he grabbed the single braid of coal-black hair as she flew by. He yanked down hard.

Like she had been shot from the sky, she plummeted to the mat. Momentarily dazed she lay there. He grabbed her in a choke hold. "Now, Poppy, I want you to lead me out of here, you understand?"

She nodded as the redhead, maintaining his hold, helped her up.

"Let's go," ordered Shayne, relaxing his grip enough so that she could walk forward. Suddenly she snapped her head back, striking him across the nose.

The redhead recoiled with the force of the blow. His head swam.

The last thing he saw as he dropped to the mat was her innocent, lollipop smile.

**SHAYNE SHOOK HIS HEAD AND BLINKED. THIS TIME HE WAS** sure it had happened. He was certain too he was sitting at the bottom of a stone-lined pit. The sand around his feet was wet, and he felt a peculiar dampness in the air. A pungent odor rammed his nose. He had sensed that smell before, but where?

Overhead he heard the familiar cackle, and a pebble struck his shoulder. He looked up.

A grinning Oriental said, "Ah, you have found that the Poppy is a deadly flower." She was standing beside her father with the same smile as before. Ho Lu rubbed his gloved hands together. "I regret that I must cut my vengeance short, but there are things in this world that pay more than revenge."

"Some host," said Shayne. "It's your feast, and you're going to miss dessert."

"No," said Ho Lu. "You have it wrong. You see you *are* the dessert, and I shall not miss you."

From behind a barred opening directly across from him the big detective heard a low growl. He knew where he had caught the smell before — at the zoo, in a wolf's den.

"My brother has not eaten for three days," said Ho Lu, kneeling down and removing his right glove.

Shayne didn't know what scared him the most. The iron gate being raised or what he saw hanging over the edge of the pit.

The huge paw of a white wolf.

## VIII

HO LU'S CACKLE RAINED DOWN ON THE DETECTIVE AS HE struggled to his feet.

"My brother," said the proud Oriental, "is a Russian red wolf. Quite rare, quite deadly. I found him on the Steppes of the Urals where I had been hired to assassinate a dissident official of the local party. My discovery turned out to be the highlight of the trip."

The bars stopped. Two red paws slid under them, and a foaming snout thrust its way through the bars.

"Be patient, Nikki," called Ho Lu. "You will have your meal in a moment."

Shayne looked at the snarling creature not ten feet away from him. "I do see a certain family resemblance," he said to the Oriental above him.

"Joke while you can," said Ho Lu. "But you are closer to the truth than you think. My East German friends think that their experiments with animal enzymes, proteins, and blood extracts are revolutionary. At the Temple of Lupus we have been utilizing such transformations for centuries — and I might add — with much more success." He thrust his white, hairy paw in the air.

The rawboned detective glanced up as Ho Lu draped his ghoulish hand over his daughter's red silk robe. "From what I remember about fairy tales, pal," spat out Shayne, "the wolf and Little Red

Riding Hood weren't quite so chummy." He wasn't about to let Ho Lu enjoy his revenge by showing the fear that welled up in his gut.

The barred gate inched upward. Now the huge red paws were digging frantically at the dirt, trying to escape their prison and get to a meal.

"Adieu, Mr. Shayne," said Ho Lu. "I shall send my copter back for your remains. Your raw bones will grace my library if not my heart."

With what sounded like a snarl, the Oriental was gone, leaving Shayne and the ever-rising portcullis.

The redhead jerked off his shirt and wrapped it around his left arm. At least Lucy's gift would afford some protection against the animal. quickly he removed his belt. The huge buckle would be the only weapon he had.

He surveyed the stone-lined pit. It was about the size of a boxing ring. He had a feeling that Ho Lu had built this hellhole as an amusing way to get rid of his enemies.

Little light reached the bottom of the pit, but directly across from him Shayne could see two glowing eyes at chest-level. Slowly a huge shape emerged from the darkness, slipping beneath the now fully lifted bars. Its size shocked Shayne. It looked like a wooly Great Dane. When he had confronted the wild dogs on the island of Nickolas Creed, the detective thought he had looked into the jaws of death, but this creature could have eaten the whole pack for lunch.

Keeping its haunch back to the wall, the dark shadow circled Shayne. Always the glowing eyes were locked on the redhead. Shayne knew that any second the beast would spring. He had to be ready.

The hair on the wolf's neck bristled, and as its lips opened in a rising snarl he saw the gleaming teeth. They reminded him of the huge jaws of the Great White Sharks that hung on the doors of fishermen in Key West.

Shayne had learned long ago that animals literally smelled fear, the secretions brought on by panic. He could sense his body responding. Maybe it was the adrenalin or maybe it was the primal instinct for survival. All civilization was stripped away. This was the primordial jungle with its one law — kill or be killed.

It sprang!

SHAYNE HAD BEEN SWINGING THE HEAVY LEATHER BELT like a key chain. As the creature came toward him, he whipped the belt hard, the buckle catching the beast's snout. It yelped, and blood

spurted on the redhead's hairy chest.

The wound enraged the wolf. It snarled and bared its teeth. Shayne lashed out, again and again. The buckle drew further blood, but if he had to wait for the creature to bleed to death, he was in trouble.

Like a bull it charged him, its bloody snout knocking him against the cold stones. The jaws came toward him, and he thrust his covered left forearm forward. As the teeth chomped down, he shoved his arm as far back in the jaws as he could. The farther back he got, the less pressure the wolf could exert.

Even at the back, though, he felt as if a giant vice had clamped his arm. The creature began to shake its head, jerking him back and forth the way the redhead had seen a dog shake a caught rat.

With his free hand he circled the belt until it wrapped around his fist tightly. Using the buckle as a battering ram, he slammed it into the wolf's twitching head. It was like pounding sand — nothing happened. How long could he keep this up?

He forced himself to his feet and stood the wolf up. Its paws flailing wildly, it was taller than he. On its hind legs Shayne guessed it stood between seven and eight feet. He was punching the wolf's underbelly, and his stomach turned at the stench of the creature.

The smooth, wet stone walls stared at him, telling him there was no chance to climb to safety. He had to fight.

His foot slipped under the heavy weight of the beast. Shayne went sprawling onto the damp floor. The snarling wolf was upon him. The fetid breath of the feral creature in his face, he knew he had never been closer to death.

## IX

THE HAIRY CANOPY OF THE WOLF CUT OUT WHAT LITTLE light there was. Shayne saw the total darkness coming.

Then the wolf, for no apparent reason, turned and bounded under the portcullis. Shayne's body wanted to lie there, to revel in the feeling of being alive, but if he was going to get out of Ho Lu's death pit, it would have to be through the lair of the wolf.

Cautiously he peered into the darkness. The familiar stench greeted his nostrils as he got down on all fours and began to crawl. If Ho Lu's purpose had been to reduce him to an animal, Shayne had to admit the scheme had worked. He didn't know why the wolf had turned and left, and he didn't care.

The tunnel split. He looked to the right. Four pairs of eyes glowed back from the floor. Perhaps the wolf had gone back to protect its

young. Hell, he wasn't going to find out. This time he went left.

He crawled through the pitch darkness, his fingers squishing the wet sand and who knows what else. After a few minutes of blindness, he saw light. A door.

It was locked. Slowly he turned himself around. Then, using his feet as piledrivers, he beat on the door. For a while the dull metal echoes told him nothing was happening, but suddenly it gave way.

He inched through the opening. The room was filled with cages, test tubes, squealing white mice, and other equipment he didn't recognize. A regular laboratory. He started to look around. Abruptly he stopped, falling against a table and knocking over some vials. The tiredness that had been pursuing him as relentlessly as Ho Lu had caught up with him.

"SENOR SHAYNE," CAME THE FAMILIAR VOICE OF CARMEN Aguila, "you always make me laugh when I am feeling down. But today Carmen is the happiest woman in the world."

"Why all the smiles?" said the redhead. "Your husband has agreed to buy you a new vacuum?"

She leaned back her head and roared her throaty Hispanic laugh that so endeared her to Shayne. "No, Carlos always says that I will run down before that." She gestured toward the screaming dinosaur that was following her around the room like a pet. "My joy comes because Ramon will soon visit his grandmama."

"I thought Castro was only letting criminals and dopeheads out of Cuba these days. And knowing you, I don't think your grandson is either of those."

"Oh never. Ramon is good boy," said Carmen. "He is coming to America with *Team Nacional* to play baseball. His country has arranged a series of exhibition ball games against the National League."

"I do remember reading something about that in the papers," said Shayne. "It's a tour sort of like the way the Russian National hockey team plays our NHL."

"It is exciting, no? Ramon has written that if it were not for all the shots he must take in his coconut, he would be looking forward to the trip to see me. Funny, no?"

"Just be sure to warn your grandson of one thing, Carmen," said the redhead.

"What is that?"

"Don't drink the water."

Shayne heard her laughter ringing in his ears as he woke up. He was still in the laboratory. Getting to his feet, he looked around. He noticed that where some of the liquid had spilled from broken test tubes, a few mice were dead in their cages. Obviously an experiment had been going on. Was this part of Ho Lu's animal investigations or something else? Right now, he didn't care. All he wanted was to get out of here, wherever here was.

He entered the hallway. His keen ears picked up nothing but the wind through palm fronds somewhere outside. The whole place seemed deserted.

Shayne pushed open a door and found himself in a room filled with books, papers, and maps. Like the other rooms he had seen coming up the hall, it was sparsely furnished. On a green metal desk sat a delicately carved ivory pipe. This must be Ho Lu's den.

On the desk behind the pipe lay a list. He scanned it quickly. April 2nd — Atlanta, April 3rd — St. Louis, April 4th — Cincinnati, April 5th — Pittsburgh, and so on. Nothing but dates and cities. Instinct told him to search the desk. Aside from a few pencils and paper clips, it yielded up only an American passport in the second drawer.

Ho Lu's picture grinned at him, but the name underneath was Rudyard Mowgli; Occupation, import-export. Shayne turned the pages. The most recent stamp revealed Ho Lu had been to Havana.

The date on the passport was March 28. How long ago was that? How long had he been inside here? He recalled the date in his first hallucination, April 1st. The dates on the list had all been for April. Could there be a connection?

And Carmen was Cuban. Ho Lu had been to Havana. His mind was trying to tell him something. But what? Had Carmen Aguila been involved in some situation that he had investigated, a situation that somehow crossed paths with Ho Lu? Or, had the Oriental simply picked this time to exact his revenge? Nothing was clear except that where Ho Lu was concerned trouble followed.

Miami International Airport that hung like a tapestry. He moved to a window and looked out. Thirty yards from the building he was in, a brown chopper was settling down on the sand like a hen on her eggs. The chopper Ho Lu had promised to send for his remains. Well, he thought, Mike Shayne was still attached to his bones and he had a few surprises left.



A guy in a brown leather jacket climbed out of the helicopter. His right hand gripped a submachine gun. Shayne pulled back from the window, satisfied from what he had seen tht Ho Lu's base of operations was an abandoned military complex.

Shayne ran down the hallway to a door leading outside. In the warm afternoon sun he waited behind some wooden crates for the pilot. For the first time the hot rays on his body made him conscious of the cuts, bruises, and dried blood left over from his encounter with Ho Lu's "brother." Nothing moved here. What had happened to the pilot?

Behind him he heard a safety released. Turning, he found himself looking into the operating end of a submachine gun.

X

THE CIGARETTE DANGLING FROM THE PILOT'S MOUTH wagged as he said, "The boss told me there was a 50-50 chance you'd figure a way out of his playpen. You're the first one to get out, you know."

The nightmare was continuing, thought Shayne. Every time he got himself out of a predicament, every time he achieved some sort of balance, another obstacle appeared in his path. Despite all that had happened, he felt he was but a step away from putting things together. To finish up the puzzle he had to overcome one Smith & Wesson 9mm M76 Submachine Gun.

"O.K., buddy," said the pilot as he strode toward the pile of crates Shayne had hidden behind, "I haven't had my daily ration of target practice. You've had a rough day, so I tell you what I'm going to do. Instead of the normal twenty yard lead, I'll give you thirty. Now take off before I stop feeling like Santa Claus."

Shayne pivoted fast, and as he did his right hand, which had been raised, tugged on the top packing crate. He hoped it wasn't full.

It wasn't.

The wooden box toppled over. The pilot looked up. In that second Shayne buried a shoulder into his chest. The Smith & Wesson chattered a staccato of steel beside his ear as they fell backward.

Shayne came down on the man — hard. The pilot looked up to see the redhead sitting on his chest. Shayne forced the gun to the side while the downed figure fought for air for his chest. Using leverage, the big detective said, "Let go, pal, or I'll break it."

The pilot's arm went limp immediately. Shayne picked up the weapon and stuck it in the prostrate figure's mouth as though it were a metal tongue depressor. "Pal, I got a few questions. Either you open up, or I do."

The pilot nodded. Shayne was glad the man had gone down quickly and hadn't put up much of a fight. His body was already operating on a reserve tank that was nearly dry. "What day is it?" said the redhead.

The pilot glanced at his left wrist. Shayne looked down. The digital watch said April 1. "Does the group from Cuba arrive today?"

The pilot nodded yes. "What time?" pursued Shayne.

The pilot mumbled something indecipherable. Shayne withdrew the dark barrel a bit. "Six o'clock," blurted out the fallen figure.

Shayne stole another glance at the man's watch. It was shortly after five. At least he had hallucinated the right day. "Where are we?" he said.

"West of Homestead. National Guard used to train here."

"If I don't squeeze this trigger, how long will it take you to get me to Miami International?"

IT WAS ALMOST QUARTER TO SIX WHEN THE REDHEAD SAW the tower. Wearing a silk shirt with green parrots that he had found in the copter, Shayne felt a little ridiculous. During the short flight he had finished putting together the pieces. He was pretty sure what Ho Lu was doing for a buck this time. Of course, a man who would turn his own daughters into Saigon streetwalkers was capable of anything.

He had the pilot not only radio for clearance, but to ask if a Metro squad car could be there to greet them. Shayne shuddered at the terrifying coincidence — a casual remark by his housekeeper had led him into an international plot.

When Shayne pushed the pilot out of the helicopter at the landing site with the submachine gun, the two waiting Metro officers drew their pieces.

"Drop it, fella," called out one.

Shayne put the cold submachine gun down on the hot tarmac. "Easy, pal. Get on the horn and get me Will Gentry."

"The chief," said one of them, patting him down.

"Listen, pal," said the redhead, "there's no time to explain, but if we don't act fast, there'll be no place anybody can hide, not even Will in his Bal Harbour home. Tell him Mike Shayne needs him."

"What do you think, Molloy?" said one of the cops.

"What the hell. The name rings a bell, and he knows something about the chief."

Five minutes later he heard the gruff voice of his old friend. "This better be Shayne, and this better be damned important."

SEVEN MINUTES LATER IT WAS 5:48, and the squad car was pulling up in front of the International Concourse. The older of the two cops led Shayne through the doors. The crowd parted as they saw one uniformed policeman and one man with wavy, red hair, a gaudy shirt, and a Smith & Wesson running down the concourse.

A host of uniformed men were waiting at the screening area. "Reynolds, Airport Security. What can we do for you? The Chief of Police just called and said to give you *carte blanche*, whatever the hell that is."

"Just take us to the gate where the Cuban delegation is," barked Shayne.

"What's up?" said Reynolds.

"We're going to need Immigration and then possibly the State Department," said Shayne, knowing this was no time for red tape. "So get moving."

As they rounded the corner, he saw a familiar face in the crowd. Standing amidst a group of TV cameras, men with microphones, and lots of grey suits was Tim Rourke. The crack reporter of the Miami *Daily News* came up to Shayne, his nose already sensing a different story.

"You look part-tourist, part-terrorist, shamus," he said. "What the hell's going on?"

"The Cubans here yet?" asked Shayne, relieved to see tangible proof that his ugly dreams had been just dreams.

"They just touched down. They'll be deplaning any minute. Why?"

"My guess is that all the men coming in have been infected with some deadly germ when they thought they were being inoculated. Our old friend Ho Lu is back in business. He plans to use the Cubans as rats to spread a modern plague through major American cities."

Rourke was incredulous. "You're kidding?"

Just then a quartet of Cubans in white suits and briefcases came through the doors. Shayne waited, but no one else appeared.

"Where's the rest?" he said after a minute.

"That's it. The whole kit and kaboodle. The Cuban Kissinger and his aides. He's trying to establish friendlier ties between Havana and Washington."

"But what about the ballplayers?"

"What ballplayers?"

"*Team Nacional*."

Rourke put a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Mike, you don't look

too good."

"*Team Nacional*," Shayne protested. "It's going to play a series of games in our major cities, and Ho Lu has the players infected. He was in Cuba. The disease will spread like wildfire, and nobody will know what it is till it's too late."

"Mike," said the scarecrow reporter, "you're talking crazy."

"No I'm not. My housekeeper . . ."

Rourke said, "Shamus, you haven't had a housekeeper for five years. Fact is, the only woman you let in your apartment is Lucy."

"You know, Tim, come on. Don't play games," said Shayne, a trace of desperation in his voice. "Carmen, Carmen Aguila."

"Your last housekeeper was an Irish lass named Molly, ah, Molly O'Brien, and she went back to Jersey to live with her sister." He turned and pointed to the tall, mustached Cuban who was shaking hands with the grey suits. "The only Aguila here is that man right there, Carlos Aguila, the Cuban Minister of Culture. A real folk hero. Began as a cutter of sugar cane. Now he's a good bet to establish better relations with . . ."

Shayne stared at the tall figure in white. What was going on? Simultaneously his ear heard the familiar whistle of Carmen Aguila's vacuum cleaner over the airport's P.A. and his eyes noticed the hand-tooled leather briefcase in Aguila's hand. Etched in leather was a huge eagle, its wings spread wide.

Shayne felt a tug on his right hand. Then he watched in horror as both arms started to shake. The submachine gun still in them quivered. "Quick, Tim," snapped the big detective, "I want you to buy me a bottle of aspirin, but first hit me, hit me on the jaw as hard as you've ever hit a man."

"What?"

"Hit me, damn you. Hit me before it's too late."

## XI

THE THIN REPORTER SWUNG A ROUNDHOUSE THAT CAUGHT the redhead squarely on his granite chin. Shayne toppled as Rourke grabbed his hand and tried to shake off the pain.

Several policeman drew their weapons. Immediately the TV cameras pointed at the commotion. Several people were shouting while a group of grey-suited men tried to push the Cuban ambassador toward the shelter of the V.I.P. Room. People started to scatter into the restrooms and gift shops.

Shayne got to one knee and shook his head. He couldn't believe his

reporter friend could pack such a kick in his roundhouse. "Where's the aspirin, Marciano?" he said.

Rourke pitched him an unopened box. "You owe me \$2.49, shamus, plus whatever the osteopath charges me," he said, flexing his already swelling hand.

Hurriedly Shayne removed the bottle and popped the cap. He pulled out the cotton, and making two balls, he rammed them into his ears. He watched Rourke mouth the words, "What's going on here?"

The redhead heard his own voice echo as though he were in a barrel. "An assassination plot with yours truly playing the part of the assassin. You were closer to the truth than you thought when you called me a terrorist. Ho Lu brainwashed me, not out of revenge, but to set me up to kill for him."

"Mike," yelled Rourke, "are you losing it?"

"I thought I was, but I'm O.K. — now. Trust me. Ho Lu's probably got a backup."

The big detective scanned the lobby. The corridor had emptied. The pool of newsmen were talking with each other, missing the story that was unfolding in front of their noses. Two cops stood in front of the open door to the V.I.P. Room. Two grey suits were escorting the Cuban delegation in that direction. A lone stewardess wheeled her pet suitcase toward a boarding area on the other side of the corridor. Coming through the screening area was a man in a wheelchair pushed by a young girl.

Shayne took off running. The tiny girl in the Little Orphan Annie dress parked the chair, picked up a bouquet of flowers off the man's lap, and started ahead. She picked up speed as she heard footsteps.

The redhead wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He launched himself into the air. Her porcelain-feature face turned just as his flying front kick caught up with her.

The blow was savage. The tiny girl sprawled into a wall a few yards from the startled Cuban delegation.

"Get Aguila inside quick," said Shayne. He brought his knee up viciously under her chin.

Her eyes tried to locate the redhead as she reeled. A security guard came running up. "Hey, friend," he called, "you can't beat up on a kid."

As the uniformed policeman started to step between Shayne and the girl, she thrust the bouquet upward. The flowers fell away, but the *sai* stuck under the badge of the surprised guard.

Her attention diverted, she never saw the fist that exploded on her cheekbone. Poppy's face caved in as she collapsed to the hard floor.

"My God," exclaimed Rourke, "she looks like she ought to be playing with dolls."

"The baby cobra — or wolf — is just as deadly as the adult," said Shayne. He turned to look at the wheelchair, but it was empty.

A muted bell went off. An emergency door was flung wide open. Shayne bolted toward it, stopping only to scoop up the submachine gun. Several cops followed him.

Ho Lu was dodging through maintenance men, so the redhead couldn't get off a clear shot. Besides, one bullet in an oil truck and instant holocaust.

Shayne's senses were awry. He didn't dare, though, pull out the cotton.

Ahead, the Oriental skidded on an oil slick and went sliding.

The ninja, his white gown stained in black, had just gotten to his feet when Shayne drew near. Shayne raised the Smith & Wesson. Four ounces of pressure, and he could do a little Oriental cooking of his own, slicing and dicing Ho Lu into oblivion.

No! He wanted the man who had tried to play with his mind. Revenge was a two-way street. Claws poked through the end of the white gloves.

Ho Lu raked at him and snarled. Shayne backed up. The Oriental lunged. Shayne parried with the gun, and then brought the butt into his mustached face.

The he-wolf grimaced. "When I told you that you had a strong will, my compliment turned out to be more than flattery."

"I should have known earlier. The red wolf that didn't kill me, all those clues you conveniently left in your headquarters to get me here under false pretenses. You even provided me with transportation, including a loose-lipped pilot who took a dive. All those dreams, that phony lab with dead mice — everything was designed to misdirect me."

"Clever, those Vietnamese," parodied Ho Lu as he started to circle Shayne.

"If an American detective killed the ambassador from Havana, you and your employers get a double payoff. You get rid of me, and your friends reduce Cuban-American relations to the level of the missile crisis."

"My friends and I were thinking a little more in terms of war."

Sirens rang in the background.

"I'd love the pleasure of finishing half the job," said Ho Lu, "but I'm afraid I must go."

The Oriental turned and ran in a sort of lope. Shayne, as much as he wanted his vengeance to be personal, knew he couldn't let him go. Call it justice. He raised the Smith & Wesson. Call it the jury.

He was about to squeeze the trigger when the unexpected happened. A small Cessna, which had been taxiing across the runway, appeared abruptly in Ho Lu's path. The Oriental, looking back over his shoulder, never saw it. The plane's blades caught Ho Lu flush.

Shayne dropped the gun, an empty feeling in his gut as the bile rose.

Two black-and-whites pulled up beside him.

## XII

SHAYNE STARED AROUND THE ROOM FOR THE MILLIONTH time. Everything looked so white he could have been in heaven, but the antiseptic odor told him it was a hospital.

Behind him a door opened and in walked two familiar figures. "The Company sends its thanks, unofficially, of course," said one of the intelligence operatives Shayne had worked with many times in the past.

"Pegus, Jones, you clowns," said the redhead. "Where am I?"

"This place doesn't exist, officially, of course," said the grey-haired Jones.

"Neither do you. Your friends all think you're in the Caribbean on vacation," said Pegus, lighting up a cigar. "Have one." The heavy agent handed Shayne a big cigar.

Shayne looked at the Spanish on the gold band. "No thanks. I've gotten as close to Havana as I want for a while." He thought he saw a smile creep around the corners of their always serious faces.

Pegus said, "We didn't find Ho Lu. Just a few blood stains on the propeller."

"The pilot," added Jones, "claimed the only thing he saw was a huge white dog bounding down the runway."

The redhead didn't even try to explain what he knew was inexplicable.

"Shayne," said Pegus, "you probably don't realize that you underwent a highly refined type of brainwashing. The Cuban military elite and their Russian comrades thought the best way to rid themselves of a dove like Aguila without angering the workers who love him was to have him assassinated in Uncle Sam's backyard by a Yankee imperialist. Ho Lu conditioned you so that when he pulled a



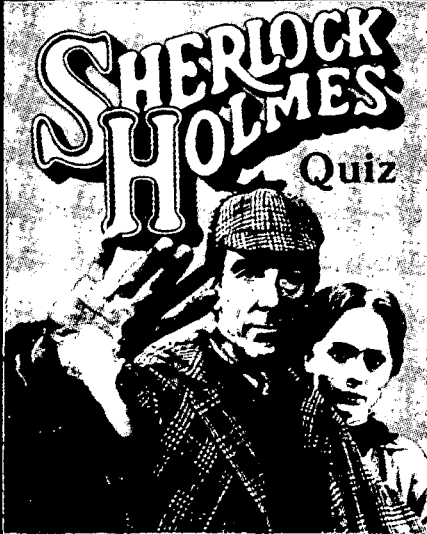
complex trigger of sound and sight you would do his dirty work."

After a long while Shayne said, "Am I cured?"

Jones handed the detective a .357 while Pegus flipped on a pocket recorder. The familiar whine of the vacuum cleaner filled the room. Jones pulled out a picture of a bald eagle in flight.

Shayne raised the gun and thumbed back the hammer. A dazed look spread over his face. Pegus and Jones hit the deck as the eagle drifted downward.

"That's the trouble with you Company men — no sense of humor," said Shayne, starting to laugh uproariously. ●



Stop!  
Don't  
Peek!

First take the  
quiz on page 118.

## Answers

1. Irene Adler
2. an opera singer
3. one of Dr. Watson's wives
4. Holmes' landlady
5. Professor Moriarty
6. Arcadia
7. Stradivarius
8. from a pawnbroker
9. A Study in Scarlet
10. a member of the medical profession
11. a burglar
12. at Reichenbach Falls
13. London
14. street urchins used by Holmes
15. a racing horse

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*The body fell from the sixteenth floor to the street below, where it bounced like a ragdoll. I walked over and took a look, and it was just as I feared. It was somebody I knew!*

# The Salvator Mundi Connection

by JERRY JACOBSON

FOR JUST A FLEETING MOMENT THE BODY APPEARED TO take flight. Its arms spread wide, it seemed to freeze in time those sixteen stories above the ground. I nearly rooted for it to fly, to suddenly find its bearings and its strength on an updraft of wind between the buildings and soar off and out of sight. But of course it did not fly. It became an object of dead weight. As the body gathered velocity, the apartment building drew it into its arms. The lump struck a protruding ledge at the fifth or sixth floor and the impact set it to cartwheeling as though the body were purposely doing tricks.

All of this I saw from a half-block away. I was walking on the opposite side of East 37th Street, approaching the Harthorne Arms and all I could think of was that Mulvihill owned the Harthorne and one of his tenants was a jumper, or the victim of violent death, which meant tenants would flee their leases in droves and, as Mulvihill's business manager, I was about to be bogged down in investigations and paper-

work and lease-jumpers. And then my heart rose to my throat. Mulvihill himself lived at the Harthorne. And on the sixteenth floor.

The body missed hitting the blue-and-white entrance awning by only a few feet. Striking that ledge had rebounded it outward, arcing it slightly so that it came to earth well beyond the sidewalk and into the rainy street. It bounced once like a ragdoll being thrown down by a petulant child and then lay still.

Almost at once a crowd began to gather in the early evening. Chic evening dressed mingled with dinner jackets paused for a grisly moment to take note of violent death before heading off for dinner and a show. They formed a semicircle on the sidewalk. Whether out of respect or fear, they were allowing the body ample distance.

Cars slowed in traffic but none stopped. There wasn't a cop in sight. I crossed the street, dancing between autos and shallow puddles of rainwater. The body seemed to think it was still in flight, its arms and legs aerodynamically spread on the wet pavement. I walked past a brown house slipper laying in the gutter.

I should have recognized that slipper, but I didn't. I reached the rear of the crowd and for the moment the body was obscured from my view. Then, a man and woman in front of me who had been craning their necks for a morbid glimpse of death slipped from the ranks like a couple in a movie theater side-stepping down a row of occupied seats, and then I could see the body in the purple velvet robe, lying on his chest, one foot bare and as starkly white as bleached bone and I could see it was Mulvihill.

AN ELDERLY WOMAN I FAINTLY RECOGNIZED AS A TENANT OF the Harthorne emerged from the building. Her hair was in curlers and she held the collars of a flowery housecoat tightly around her neck. With bitty steps she circled the knot of onlookers to the curbing, took a blanket from under her arm, draped it quickly over the body and then scurried back into the building.

Finally a police cruiser swung into the block, its blue dome light flashing, a weak piece of glitter in the electrified Manhattan night. It drew up along side Mulvihill's sleek 450SE parked at the curb (which I thought unusual because Mulvihill had a favored slot in the basement garage), to block the outside lane of traffic from use. Both officers got out. The passenger officer looked across the top of the cruiser at his partner and then up at the black sky, perhaps thinking a full-fledged cloudburst was now in order since it appeared they'd drawn a nasty

suicide in the better part of town.

The older of the two officers had been driving. He stuffed a cigar into his scowling mouth and said out at the crowd, "Does anyone recognize this man?"

No one spoke up. Several heads shook almost imperceptively.

"Did anyone see what happened here?"

Again there were no voices.

"Then, if none of you can identify this man and none of you witnessed the incident, I am requesting that you all move along now."

The draped blanket seemed to have removed most of the morbidity from the scene. And the rain was beginning to fall harder now. The crowd began dispersing, passing around me on both sides. I kept my eyes trained on the lump under the blanket while I rummaged in my mind for some kind of silent, proper eulogy. The one which began *A fool and his money* . . . seemed cold and overly critical. *Experto credite* made a fairly nice fit, if sadly prophetic in Mulvihill's case. Believe the man with experience. Yes, that would do as a rainy expedient for now. If there had been a major flaw in Mulvihill's character, it was that he tended all too often to discount the advice of experts. I wondered to what extent, if any, it had got him dead on a piece of cold, wet pavement with no friend around but me to shed a little grief.

There were just the three of us now, not counting Mulvihill: the two officers and myself. We stared at each other a minute. Then the officers shot quick looks at each other, transmitting that both were aware I'd remained behind after the dispersal order for a reason.

The beefy, cigar-smoking officer examined me a moment and then said, "Sir, did you see what happened here?"

"Not entirely," I answered. "I was down the block a ways. I saw the body in midair, so to speak."

The officer nodded gravely. "Then you couldn't say whether he fell, jumped, or was pushed."

"No, I couldn't say one way or the other."

"Fuller, get on the horn and get us a homicide detective and somebody from the M.E.," the officer said to his younger partner.

"Maybe nobody's checked to see if the guy's dead yet," said the younger man. "Shouldn't we do that first?"

"He came from either the roof or the sixteenth floor," I said.

The older officer's cigar dislodged slightly from between clenched teeth. "You *know* him?"

"His name is Claude Mulvihill," I said. "He owns this building and

five others in Manhattan besides."

"A *resident-owner*? Hell, in *this* town, those are as tough to find as safety pins in a nudist camp. No, Fuller, we don't check to see if he's dead. Falling sixteen stories is like falling from the planet Neptune. Just get us a homicide dick and a meat wagon."

THE YOUNGER MAN LEFT FOR THE CRUISER. THE OTHER'S cigar had been extinguished by the rain. "I wonder, can we go into the lobby and get in out of this rain?"

"The building is security-locked and I don't have a key," I told him.

"Then you don't live here yourself."

"No. I have an apartment near Bryant Park. I was on my way home and just happened to be passing the building."

The officer nodded and wanted to know my name.

"John Hatton," I said.

The officer scribbled it down quickly in a small notebook and then returned the book just as quickly to a breast pocket to get it out of the rain.

"What is your relationship to the deceased, Mr. Hatton?" the officer asked.

"I was his business manager. I guess I still am, until I'm kicked out or retained by his heirs. I pay the taxes on his buildings, see to renovations and upkeep, scout new properties for him to purchase."

"Did your Mr. Mulvihill work?" asked the officer. "I mean, did he have a job?"

I tried to stifle a bemused smile at the naivety of the question, but I wasn't altogether successful. "Officer, people of property don't *have* to work. Their property works *for them*. People like *you and me* work."

The policeman's expression was one of embarrassment and that singular puzzlement which comes over people to whom the skill, art and savvy of making large amounts of money is always an unfathomable mystery. "This Mulvihill guy was rich, huh?"

I elaborated. "His various properties earned him in the neighborhood of \$120,000 a month, after the payments of his taxes, his six building managers and his other employees — his lawyer, his accountant, his collection agency . . . ."

"Collection agency?"

"For the collecting of delinquent rents. Mr. Mulvihill felt it was undignified to dirty his hands in that respect."

"Well, er, of course," said the officer, still treading in water that

was a little deeper than was comfortable. "I can understand that, all right. I mean, the guy shouldn't have to be no bill collector, dogging tenants in hallways and bugging them on the phone and all of that. I mean, there's *people* you can get to do that kind of work."

The younger patrol officer returned to the sidewalk to tell his partner a detective and coroner's ambulance were on their way.

"Mr. Hatton, you say Mr. Mulvihill lived on the top floor of the building?"

"The sixteenth floor has two eight-room suites," I said. "Suite 1600 was Mulvihill's and 1601 is leased to some right-wing libertarian investor named Fairchild. International free-spirit type. Currencies, precious metals. I've heard he always travels with two suitcases, one filled with drip-dry shirts and the other filled with money."

The patrolman's eyes hooded with dark suspicion. He would clear this all up before any detectives or coroners arrived to clutter the scene and muddle the issues. "This Fairchild guy could have done it, all right. Some international monetary intrigue he got tangled up in with your Mr. Mulvihill. Poured him out a window up there over some big deal that went sour. A rich guy like your Mulvihill's got everything going for him, so why would he dim his own bulb? Get his apartment key off him before the homicides and the coroners turn up and let ourselves into the building and out of this damn rain."

"I wouldn't go to the bank with that, officer," I said.

"Oh you wouldn't," came the voice, with just a touch of challenge in it. "And why not?"

"Because people don't usually pack their apartment keys around with them when they're wearing robes and pajamas."

The patrolman looked prepared to make more of my impertinence, but the issue was made moot when a young woman wearing a powder-blue jogging suit emerged from the building. She was tethered to a sleek and mean-looking Doberman pinscher. We gave them both a wide berth. The Harthorne's front door hesitated pneumatically just long enough to let me get the toe of one shoe wedged in as a doorstep.

"Hold that door, Hatton!" the patrolman yelled out to me; and then he saw the tip of my shoe blocking the door's closure and the small grin on my face and he flushed with embarrassment all over again.

We stood there in the vaulted Victorian lobby about ten minutes. I passed the time amusing myself with the slow-motion response-time of the N.Y.P.D. and with my companion-in-waiting as he tried to relight his soggy cigar and look comfortable surrounded by French

crystal chandeliers and Queen Anne mirrors. It was my guess he would rather have been surrounded by a slab of pizza and a pitcher of beer.

Finally the police teams arrived and I was left alone in the lobby. Headlights and spotlights suddenly bathed the dark, rainy street in harsh, surrealistic light. Crime investigation barriers went up and a man in a suit and limp raincoat began to chalk an outline around Mulvihill's body, but gave it up when he saw the rain was washing it into oblivion. There were measurings with tapes and photographs and a detective plopped a dark-blue rubber bag down on the sidewalk and everyone who was anyone began taking notes.

LEFT ALONE AS I WAS BEYOND THE INNER SANCTUM OF THE incident, my mind turned itself inward. I began reflecting upon Claude Mulvihill's life, or rather, that portion of it that had touched on my own. I was looking out at wrongful death and I felt that if I could somehow bring the scales of Mulvihill's life back into balance, then my pain and sorrow would ease.

I first met Mulvihill seven years earlier. Then, I was slugging my way through night courses in business at Seton Hall, still unconvinced that I would ever become a success at anything. Night college always made you feel a little like a mole as you burrowed through the lonely darkness and tried to make a little bit of headway in the world. I worked days in the shipping department of a book publishing firm that was very big on mail-order book clubs, but not so big on acquiring literary stature. I boxed up bad mysteries and trashy romances and tried not to think of what I was doing to the minds of the firm's subscribers. I worked at a marginally ethical company and was a peripheral student who had to sneak his education only after the sun went down. I was twice cursed and I knew it; but I'd been in a war and hadn't died from it and I had my health and my ambitions and all of that added up to a trade-out I could live with.

Somewhere along the line I'd taken a genuine fancy toward real estate. I buried myself in the laws and rules of property appraisal, tax law and the wondrous, myriad world of tax shelter. I was astounded at the breadth, depth and manner of ways one could hide from taxation. I began vulturizing the foreclosure auctions, where quiet, seemingly innocuous little men deftly snapped up precious real estate for little more than a song and dance. Huddling quietly in administration building cafeterias, sifting through the results of title searches

and pending writs of foreclosure, these were the city's real millionaires, opportunistic and sharp-eyed men to whom even a Rockefeller would bow in respect. They knew each nook and cranny in every public administrative building in Bronx and Westchester counties and every clerk and manager by his first name.

At that time, Claude Mulvihill's only property was the Harthorne, inherited upon the death of his parents in the crash of an airliner over the Atlantic. A younger brother and sister received cash and stock in trust, neither of whom seemed all that enthusiastic about managing an aging property like the Harthorne Arms, or even owning a share in it. The building, after all, was expensive to operate, drafty wherever one pointed a finger and a little bit like living inside an elephant. It was a bequeathment Mulvihill accepted almost by default.

I ran into Mulvihill on that initial occasion quite literally. Rather, he ran into me. He hit me with his car. In Manhattan, being mindful of auto traffic is the first rule of survival. That afternoon, I broke that cardinal law in Herald Square when I stepped from the curb with my eyes only on the opposite side of Broadway. The Mercedes' right front fender scarcely brushed my left upper leg and thigh, but I was in midstep and stupidly off-balance and that tenuous position served to send me sprawling in a moderate spin onto the curbstone.

Of course no one stopped or even paused to see if I was all right or stone cold dead. New Yorkers almost never show each other that much interest or compassion, unless the victim is an immediate relative, or unless they stand to gain financially from the intercession.

But Mulvihill interceded, came out from behind the wheel of the Mercedes on the run like an absolutely uninsured man with everything to lose but his kitchen sink. Dressed in a pair of paint-splattered gray flannel trousers and New York Giants tee-shirt, he wasn't all that much to look at, just all eyes and bobbing Adam's apple and bony shoulders. I was already back on my feet and all brushed off and ready to move on my way, but Mulvihill would have none of that.

"Look, old man, should you really be on your feet? You could have internal injuries, *head* injuries. We'll hustle you off to a hospital pronto. Full exam. The best. I insist."

My first impression of him then was one of pity: here was a man trying desperately to please and failing at it miserably. One had to admire someone who commanded respect. But one could only feel sorrow for someone who outright begged for it.

"I'm all right, really," I told him. "Only a glancing blow."



"You're sure."

"Your fender just brushed my trouser leg."

He wanted to take me to lunch at his club to show there were no hard feelings. Or to dissuade me from a lawsuit in case I was contemplating along those lines. I saw no reason to refuse. Night school students without scholarships or lineage never ate all that well or often. I feigned a limp as I made my way for Mulvihill's car, just in case a cash settlement came up for discussion.

IT WAS CALLED THE BARNABY CLUB AND IT WAS IN THE EAST Eighties just off Central Park. Manhattan was riddled with these old boys' hang-outs, holes-in-the-wall with good food, unwatered liquor and sleeping rooms upstairs. The yearly dues could get astronomical, but that was the price you paid for avoiding the crush of nameless cafeterias and the dried-up pork chops.

The club was a costly replica of an English public house. The thick ceiling beams were genuine and so was the Prime Rib with Yorkshire Pudding. Mulvihill looked a little too young to be lolling around sipping very Dickensian port while the day wasted away. His membership had been inherited from his father, he explained, along with an apartment building and tenants who had little or no respect for a man with inherited wealth. Except for collecting their rents, he avoided their abuse entirely. He collected coins, stamps and art and these kept him occupied; and he attended backers' parties and kept alert for any promising Broadway shows or plays he could put money into. A man of property and of leisure pastimes. But one tragically disliked and disrespected.

He asked me to tell him something about myself, which I did. The night school, the day job as dull as dishwater, my burgeoning mania for real estate. My autobiography took less than a minute to tell; and likely it was less than earthshaking to hear.

Mulvihill wanted to know more about the real estate, and when he seemed convinced I was neither a dabbler nor a fool about it, his interest perked up. "Do you know the Harthorne Arms on East 37th?" he asked.

I told him I did.

"That's my property," he said, not troubling to keep the apology from his tone. "I'd like to raise my rents there. Only if I do, City Hall will drop on me like an old flophouse coming down."

"Strong rent control ordinances," I said. "And you're under code

as far as the fire regulations are concerned. Every building in the East Thirties is far under code, as a matter of fact."

"So, how do I justify any rent increases?"

"You renovate," I told him. "Remortgage the building."

"Then?"

"Then, widen your lobby so it's bigger than the hole-in-the-wall it is now. Update your wiring, put in hallway sprinkler systems and smoke detectors. But the key is widening your lobby. Midtown tenants might overlook the fact they live in crackerbox units if you give them an imposing lobby. They like to be seen *"going into a building with a plush lobby, an all-weather awning and a doorman wearing all that glitter and fruit salad."*

"What will all that cost me?" Mulvihill wanted to know.

"I can work up some cost estimates for you. Sound out a couple of contractors I know."

"You sound like you know your stuff."

"I do," I told him. "I can even scout around for foreclosure properties, if you've got any idle capital you want to put to work."

"You've got a green light on that, Hatton," Mulvihill intoned, as he flagged down a waiter for a couple of glasses and a flagon of good port to toast the wedding of capital and expertise.

WITHIN EIGHT MONTHS, I HAD THE HARTHORNE ARMS transformed into a raving beauty that was fully tenanted, with a waiting list ten blocks long. Not far from there, I got wind that the Meydenbauer Apartments might be up for grabs and that its woe-betide owner was even in the market for a professional firebug to burn it to the ground. That information, coupled with another rumor I'd fielded, made the Meydenbauer a very attractive property to own and I told Mulvihill about it.

"Can you be sure of your information?" he asked.

"Just a rumor and you know about rumors. They can usually circle the globe ten times before the truth even has a chance to pull on its pants. But in this case, I think I'd go for my wallet. Somebody wants that corner for a ten-story wholesale furniture mart."

Convinced I knew what I was talking about, Mulvihill wasted no time going to the bank. Five months later, his lot and building sold for half a million, easily twenty times what he'd paid for it. There were other buildings whose age belied their structural strength and their possibilities for facelifts. One by one, I pointed them out to Mulvihill

when they came up for sale or auction and one by one he snapped them up. Gradually he came to realize that real estate was a bit more than maintenance and sheer greed. He realized it could be socially beneficial and it could be outright fun. And while he would never be in the financial category of the Fifth Avenue wizards who bought the Bonwit Tellers and turned them into 150-million dollar goliathan condo apartments with Tiffany's for a neighbor, he would prosper in the backwashes of real estate development well enough.

At that juncture in his life, Mulvihill's downfall was not even a visible speck on the horizon. The Inverted Jennys might have been a tip-off to me that Mulvihill's lack of worldliness might get him into deeper trouble, had I been paying closer attention and identified it as a glaring character flaw. But I hadn't.

The Inverted Jennys really devastated Mulvihill at the time, because he had been trying so very hard to gain some measure of social stature among his fellow Manhattanites. He went to the Guggenheim twice a week, got a membership in the prestigious Stock Exchange Luncheon Club, never missed a Mahler symphony at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, or Baryshnikov at the American Ballet Theater, or Pavarotti at the Met. And he told everyone who made the fatal mistake of being conversationally cornered by him that he had Schlage dead-bolt locks on all his apartment units — all of this calculated to shoe-horn himself into high society.

But hardly anyone ever got into the ball by painting a tux on himself with a brush. He was like the deaf man who became the laughing stock: he never heard the laughter. He sensed it, suspected it, but could never *prove* it. He cut a tragic figure, but he never passed a mirror.

The Jennys were meant to be the stamp coup of the century and had I known the impetuous transaction was about to take place, I might have been able to head off disaster. But Mulvihill, as I've already said, fancied himself a philatelic wizard, with a noteworthy collection, who felt he needed no outside assistance or interference.

I LEARNED OF HIS PURCHASE SIX WEEKS AFTER BOTH CASH and stamps had changed hands. Mulvihill called me on the phone and said he had some spectacular news and would I have dinner with him in his newly renovated and decorated suite on the sixteenth floor of the Harthorne. I told him I'd be there at eight o'clock. Mulvihill commented that he'd done a mighty wondrous little thing and really

couldn't wait that long to tell me about it and could we make it seven.

As it developed, dinner would be put off for another time. When I arrived, Mulvihill all but yanked me off my feet and marched me into his small study. Beaming from ear to ear, he hastily uncorked a bottle of champagne and filled two glasses.

"John, I've negotiated the philatelic coup of the century, maybe for all the ages!" he said with high excitement, as champagne sloshed over the rim of his glass.

"Well, I'll drink to that," I told him, willing to suspend my disbelief for the moment. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

We had a second glassful and then Mulvihill hauled me over to his desk. Centered on it was an expensive leather binder, the cover of which Mulvihill threw back with dash and flair. He peeled back a sheet of acetate, took a step backward and extended his right arm and palm to indicate what had just been revealed.

"John, I give you the Inverted Jennys."

What I was looking down at was a rectangle of stamps, ten across and ten down, each identical to the next in its rank and file — one sheet of one hundred 24-cent stamps depicting the Curtiss-Wright JN-4 Jenny biplane printed upside-down.

"I've been on the trail of these for months," Mulvihill bubbled, like a kid who'd just traded to complete a full set of bubblegum cards of the 1947 Chicago Cubs. "Blind alleys, false leads, dashed hopes. And then, yesterday, it all came together for me. The only sheet of Inverted Jennys printed. Sold or put up for auction individually, their worth easily \$100,000 *apiece*!"

As I listened to Mulvihill's verbal victory dance, something began to stir at the back of my brain, something I'd read, something I'd read just recently. The *New York Times*? Yes, I thought so. A month ago? More than likely. No more than two? Most probably.

I asked Mulvihill what he'd paid for the sheet of Inverted Jennys.

"Eight-hundred thousand," he said.

Now, *that* didn't make much sense to me. Who in his right mind would give up stamps worth 10-million for a paltry \$800,000? True, stamps had no true day-to-day value; they were worth only what someone was willing to pay for them. But these were genuine rarities. Oh-oh. *Genuine*. Without meaning to, I'd hit flush upon the operative word.

Though I'd never liked to see good wine go to waste — especially a 1973 Dom Perignon, which we were now drinking — I had to place a

palm over my glass as Mulvihill started to repour. "Claude," I told him, "we're going to have to postpone dinner."

"Why?" he asked, giving me a dog's dinner stare.

"Because I've got a trip to the public library to make."

Mulvihill flounced his body about in a sort of body language pout. "The *library*? We're smack dab in the middle of one of the biggest events of my life and you want to check out books?"

"No," I told him, "I want to check out some newspaper micro-film."

"Can't it wait?"

"Well, it could, yes. But I'd rather it wouldn't."

"That urgent?"

"Could be, yes."

The body-pout turned itself into a rigid stance of indignance. "Will you be back, then?"

"If it's good news," I told him.

"And if it's *bad* news?"

"Then I'll use the safety of telephonic distance and call you."

"Hatton, this is all very mysterious."

"Well, I hope it won't be for much longer," I told him, and meant every word of it.

AND MUCH LONGER IT WASN'T. BUT GOOD NEWS IT WASN'T, either. Armed with the basic data from a *Times* news story dated Thursday, December 9, 1982, I called Mulvihill from a phone booth in Herald Square.

There was really no need to beat around the bush, so I came straight to the point.

"Claude, I'm awfully afraid your Inverted Jennys are counterfeit."

"Impossible," came the voice, although the assertion seemed without conviction.

I saw no usefulness in allowing the blade to hover. "Claude, in December of last year, one Inverted Jenny was recovered by FBI agents in Chicago. It had been stolen from an exhibit at a stamp convention in Virginia and authenticated as genuine — a bonified 1918 24-cent airmail issue of the Inverted Jenny."

Across the line fell a whisp of an intake of breath, which easily qualified as a gasp.

"That stamp, Claude, was the second Inverted Jenny to be re-

covered from the block of four stamps stolen in Virginia. The key phrase here, Claude, is 'block of four.' Does the significance of those words come through to you?"

Although Mulvihill didn't respond, I knew he was on the verge of admitting he'd been suckered.

"Now, if those four stamps have been authenticated as the real article and separated from the only 100-stamp sheet of Inverted Jennys extant on the face of the earth, what does that make *your* 100-stamp sheet?"

"Makes it bogus, I guess," came the little whimper of a voice. "Well then, can I prosecute?"

"You can," I told him, "*if* you track down the seller. And *if* you can prove he sold you the stamps. Claude, can you do those two things?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you have a bill of sale and was the bill of sale notarized?"

"No, neither of those."

"You paid cash," I said.

"Yes. I paid cash."

"Well then, Claude," I told him point-blank. "I'm afraid you've just gone out into the world armed with a little bit of knowledge, which we both know is a very dangerous thing, and you've just got your butt kicked."

"Yes, it appears I have," came the weak response.

"You should notify the police," I instructed him. "I don't know if any good will come from that, but at least it will be officially down on the books as a felony and a fraud."

"Yes, John, I'll do that right now."

"And after you've done that," I advised, "swallow your loss with a couple of stiff belts of Remy Martin, or a suitably potent substitute and try and get some sleep."

"Yes, all as you suggest."

"And don't do anything . . ."

"Dramatically drastic?" said Mulvihill. "No, John. No razor blades across the wrists, no fistful of amphetamines, and no dives from the balcony. I'll be all right. Really."

"Atta boy, I'll talk to you tomorrow," I told him and put up the phone's receiver very gently, so as not to upset what I read to be an extremely delicate balance.

IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING, I TRIED TO CONVINCE MULVI-

hill of the extreme hazards in speculating in the collector's world: that the results would likely be very similar to what the first caveman experienced when he reached a hand into the fire to retrieve a slab of cooked meat.

And largely, my advice was heeded. Mulvihill bought a few paintings, but most of them were by emerging impressionists and print reproductions of lesser works by Vermeer, Rubens, Goya and the like. He'd heard this was "The Impressionist Epoch" in America and so he tore around searching for French masterpieces by Renoir, Monet and Degas, but thank God, he was mostly unsuccessful. Bluntly speaking, I told him to let his wallet cool down.

FOR THE MOMENT, MY REMEMBRANCES OF CLAUDE MULVIHILL past were put aside. Outside the building the coroner's men were placing the body inside a heavy, blue, rubber bag. I watched as one of the men zipped the bag closed. Then, the two of them bore Mulvihill to the rear of the coroner's van and placed him inside. It appeared to be very sad, rough treatment for a man who had been so very recently alive. Once more flashing red lights splayed the darkness and then the van was hustling off into the night under a siren's scream, bearing away one of perhaps dozens of victims who would see their mortality come to abrupt and horrid ends this night.

A detective removed the restraining barricades and his partner made some final notes and then slipped his notebook inside his coat. The barricades went into the back seat of a sedan and in another moment the sedan too was gone. Anyone happening upon the site now would be hard-pressed to tell a death had even happened there.

There was nothing to look out at anymore and so I took a chair in the lobby facing away from the street and took up my reminiscences of Mulvihill once more.

The *Salvator Mundi* connection seemed to me to have begun the previous autumn. As I recall, the New York sky was cloudy and leaden and a heavy drizzle was seeping down and I was eating lunch in a cafeteria on the edge of Greenwich Village, near the New School for Social Research. Mulvihill passed the front window on foot, happened to glance inside, saw me there, and came through the front door. He seemed agitated, excited. He couldn't stop swirling his spoon in his coffee.

"John, I believe I may have stumbled upon the art find of the century," he said in a voice which seemed to contain only a whisper of

breath. "One of my tenants at the Clifton Apartments is an assistant instructor of art and art history at N.Y.U. and a friend of his studying in Europe thinks she may be on the track of a rare Leonardo."

A strong surge of *deja vu* passed a black cloud across my brain. "Do I take that to mean *the* Leonardo? I mean, the one whose last name is da Vinci?"

"Exciting, isn't it? An extant work by the master, previously believed to be lost or destroyed. And here it is, about to *fall* into my hands."

I knew a little bit about da Vinci's works. Not so much that it had art historians rushing up to me for advice, but enough to keep me in a circle of conversation about him for a few minutes.

I said to Mulvihill: "And does this painting have a name? Is it titled?"

"It's titled *Salvator Mundi*. Or 'Savior of the World,' a Jesus rendition. See, John, it's sort of a problem piece in that thirteen versions of the painting are known to be in existence, and all said to have been done after the original turned up lost."

"And now there are fourteen versions," I said.

"Or the original itself," countered Mulvihill, both eyes flashing like twin stars. "It's the very controversy surrounding these paintings that's kept their prices high. After all, speculators and collectors have made more money from the mystique of paintings than from their authenticity, so whether this enchilada is just one more copy or the genuine article isn't much of an issue."

WHILE MULVIHILL BOUNCED JOYOUSLY OFF TO THE CAFETERIA's serving line for more coffee, I mulled over what I'd just been told and weighed it against what I knew about classical painting. I did some quick distillation and found Mulvihill's conclusions about the worth of art couldn't be disputed. Questioned paintings *did bring* just as much at auction and in private sales as works whose authorship was undisputed over centuries. The paramount yardstick was the test of time and the test of time usually prevailed the way the qualities of common aspirin prevailed against the endless battalions of new-fangled, laboratory pain-relievers. In the end, authentic or as phony as a Daffy Duck dollar bill, a piece of art was worth what the traffic was willing to pay for it.

Mulvihill returned beaming like a summer sun. Perhaps it was a quirk of inner vision, but I saw that face as an exquisite cameo of



blissful naivete.

I asked him: "Claude, do you know where your *Salvator Mundi* was found?"

"The girl found it in the cellar of an old abbey in a village in northern France. A few kilometers north of Reims, I believe she said. Just a few caretaker monks living out the final years of a dying order. Vineyards overgrown, stone decaying. The girl had been abbey-hunting the entire week, scooting around the countryside on a rented Vespa. Mostly she was painting them, but no serious student of art can resist investigating an ancient abbey or two on the off-chance there's an old masterpiece laid away and forgotten."

"Did your N.Y.U. friend tell you the girl's name?" I asked.

"Tamara," said Mulvihill. "Yes, Tamara Gilbert."

"And your friend's name?"

"Harold Telsch. Nice kid. Honest, hard-working. He hung two of his own paintings in the Harthorne lobby and wouldn't even let me pay for them."

I pondered whether Mulvihill possessed the raw intelligence to judge another's character or motives. He wasn't, by any stretch of reason or fact, a cerebral person. Hadn't he bemoaned to me the fact that not once, daily, in fifteen years, had he ever completed a New York Times crossword puzzle? And there was, too, the affair of the Inverted Jennys to be considered. He'd been smoked there in spades. More and more, this *Salvator Mundi* connection loomed as another borderline transaction; and with his skin still healing from the Inverted Jennys fiasco, it was possible Mulvihill might be ripe for skinning again.

"Tell me," I said to Mulvihill, "does the girl have the painting in her possession now?"

"She paid the monastery in francs the equivalent of \$100," Mulvihill said. "They were a poor, crumbling order and all but wrestled her to the ground for the money. And how many French monks are able to discern an Italian masterpiece turning up in France? They took the francs and ran and Tamara took the painting and motored. It was as simple as that."

"Two satisfied customers," I said.

"Well, one a bit more satisfied than the other," Mulvihill grinned.

"What's being done with the painting now?"

"There's a whole rigmarole to go through to gain the work a little

attribution. The way Harold's explained it to me, this attribution-business means art experts have to get behind the painting and attribute the work as being done by da Vinci, or as *possibly* being done by da Vinci, in the case of the *Salvator Mundi*. The more attribution, the more the painting is worth. Of course, the *Salvator Mundi* — or any one of them — won't ever be entirely undisputed, but if you can pile up enough endorsements, the question of the lack of authenticity becomes virtually moot."

I knew about the process involving the authentication of works of art, a tedious and complicated business where at stake were reputations, egos, technical and philosophical viewpoints, as well as the sometimes considerable risks taken by both buyer and seller.

I asked Mulvihill, "Do you know where the painting's connoisseurship will take place?" This process I knew to be the first on the long road toward attribution. The term was derived from the French verb "connaître" — which meant "to know" — and involved the technician's pure, laboratory examination of the work in question.

Mulvihill knew what I was driving at. "It's being done someplace in France. I'm told it's a very exhaustive analysis. Five or six radiation tests, a couple of new X-ray processes, pigments tests, a needle extraction of a cross-section of the work to see what sort of layering sequences the artist used and what manner of pigments were used and how they were ground. If the painting stands up to these tests, its eventual attribution is as certain as sunrise."

Well, that wasn't quite true. Mulvihill's painting might emerge from the laboratory with a clean bill of health, but it would still have to stand up to a bevy of subjective examinations by art historians as they attempted to trace the lineage of Mulvihill's questionable da Vinci, as well as the assiduous scholarly examination of the painting itself in terms of the painter's facility and style themselves, his use of colors, his renderings of shading and light, the stroke of his brush, how he articulated the anatomy of noses, eyes, chins and the like. No, contrary to Mulvihill's enthusiasm, the arduous process had only just begun.

"The thing of it is, John," Mulvihill said, "all these scientific and historical tests needn't *prove* the painting is authentic. So long as they don't *negate* it as being an original da Vinci, we're in business."

"We're in business?" I said. Ah, here was that little something that thus far hadn't met my eye. "What do you mean by that, Claude?"

"I intend to *buy* that painting," he said. "I thought you understood

that. I mean, Telsch and his girlfriend are as poor as churchmice. *Abbey-mice*. And they're painters and instructors of art, not collectors. If we come to an agreement on a price that's fair, I'll have a work of art that's a reasonably good speculative risk and they'll have what amounts to sponsorship money for graduate school study, or for historical research, or even for marriage and a family begun on a solid, financial base. Everyone thereby comes out a winner."

"Of course, your purchase of this da Vinci is contingent upon a successful attribution of the painting," I said, to interject a warning of caution on Mulvihill's behalf.

"Without a doubt, John. Those Inverted Jennys taught me to tread lightly and carefully in the world of speculators and collectors."

"That's the ticket," I told him. "Keep your head firmly attached to your shoulders and no one will hand it to you dripping blood from the neck."

Mulvihill then suggested that we toast his future with the redoubtable *Salvator Mundi* over a bottle of his favorite Dom Perignon at The Barnaby Club.

"Claude," I told him, "let's not go off half-corked here. I think we should wait a while and see how the tests and analyses go and what kind of foothold the attribution gets. Then, if all those signs are positive and you strike a good bargain with your Mr. Telsch and Ms. Gilbert, we'll Dom Perignon until the *vaches* come home."

FROM TIME TO TIME OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL WEEKS, I would touch base with Mulvihill to learn how the vital attribution was coming along. The fits and starts of it made him alternately elated and blue. At one juncture, the girl had flown with the painting to Harvard University, where a battery of technical experts at the famed Fogg Art Museum studied the wood grain to determine whether it was similar to that of other works known to have been done by da Vinci. Once or twice Mulvihill confessed to me that he was about ready to toss in the towel on the whole transaction; that it seemed evident to him that authentication and attribution of his *Salvator Mundi* seemed as near at hand as the closest star hung out in space.

Weeks combined to make months and Mulvihill's pursuit of his *Salvator Mundi* drifted into a bearable ennui of waiting. Attribution, he soon learned and admitted, moved with an energy and speed all its own and couldn't be hurried as easily as dealing it a swift kick in the behind.

Primary thoughts of it all passed out of mind as I immersed myself in Mulvihill's business affairs. It was my job and it was something over which I had some control, whereas Mulvihill's compulsive quests for status acquisitions were to me almost like dealings done on another planet.

AND NOW HERE I WAS, IN THE LOBBY OF ONE OF MULVIHILL'S buildings, feeling a little bit like an accessory to suicide. The elusive *Salvator Mundi*, I was nearly certain, had played some role in it, too. But proofs of that were thinner than evidence that the wind began and ended at some specific, documented point.

Mulvihill's Mercedes caught my eye again as I stared out the lobby's front window at the dreary rain. Knowing how habitual Mulvihill had been about certain things, its presence there was as out of place as a nun at a disco. There was a pile of newspapers on a table. I took one from the stack, rolled it and used it as a doorstop. I went out into the street and up to Mulvihill's sedan. He kept his car keys on a separate ring and they were still in the ignition. He had not parked in the garage and he had not taken time to remove his keys, all of which bespoke a man in a terrible hurry. Then, somewhere out in the city, he'd heard something or learned something from someone and it had installed a panic in him like a frightened beast. And yet he had died in his robe and slippers, which did not make his suicide a rash, impetuous act, but one which had been pondered and weighed as a decision made out of either judiciousness, embarrassment, anger, or shame. And that puzzled me even more than the man himself.

I returned to the building, closed the front door tight and returned the newspaper. My gaze shifted to the elevators and my mind's eye drifted up to the sixteenth floor. There might be a world of things to know and understand up there, or there might be nothing to learn at all.

I rode the elevator up in a glide that felt like a dream. I was thinking, all the way up, about the placement of Mulvihill's body. It had nearly hit the entrance awning. But Mulvihill's livingroom balcony was at least thirty feet north of that, which meant he'd poured himself over the smaller balcony draped out over the window of his study. If a trigger had been pulled, it had been pulled there.

The older patrolman I'd talked with downstairs in the rain had been assigned to guard the door to Mulvihill's suite. He swelled himself to unnatural height when I approached and then, recognizing me, relaxed

and smiled.

"Mr. Hatton, isn't it? You'd just be wasting your time in there. Not much going on."

"Can I go in?" I asked.

"They don't like a lot of strangers cluttering up an investigation scene. Moller, he's a bastard about things like that."

"Claude Mulvihill was my boss and my friend."

The officer pondered that a moment, then poked his head into the livingroom. "Lieutenant Moller, sir?"

A heavysset man appeared from another room in Mulvihill's suite. His trenchcoat was limp and speckled with raindrops. An identity card was clipped to its collar.

"Who you got there?"

"This is John Hatton, sir. The deceased's business manager. He was approaching the building on foot when Mulvihill took his dive."

"Let him in," said the detective, who then abruptly disappeared again.

I ENTERED AND WALKED THROUGH A SPOTLESS AND EMPTY livingroom, down the main hallway and into the master bedroom, where the detective stood in its exact center with his hands planted on his hips, looking as alone as the guy who turned up one day too early for the dance.

"Come in, Hatton, come in. I might want to ask you some questions. That is if I can come up with any. I was going to bring my whole team up here. My tech people, a photog, the works. But hell, there's nothing here. No forced entry, no signs of a struggle. A neat, well-ordered suicide, but no note. Mr. Hatton, you got any ideas why your boss would want to kill himself?"

"Not a one," I said.

"Business reversals? A love affair gone sour? Deteriorating health? Criminal involvement?"

"None of those, I'm sure."

"He went over the balcony in the study," said Moller. "Down the hall passed the bathroom. Nothing in there, either. Just the French doors thrown open and the drapes soaked with rain. Was Mulvihill married, divorced, or a widower?"

"None of the above," I said. "He was single."

"Parents?"

"Dead."

"Brothers or sisters?"

"One of each. Both younger. I have their addresses if you need them."

"Notification of next-of-kin," said Moller. "I'll need them."

I had their addresses on a slip of paper in my wallet. I handed the slip to the detective. "You can keep it. I have their addresses on file at home."

"Obliged, Mr. Hatton." He handed me his own card in return. "Suicides are pretty cut-and-dried affairs, but loose ends are pesky, dangling little things that'll make you crazy. Should you learn from anyone why Mr. Mulvihill killed himself, give me a call. It's not for any official record. Just my own peace of mind."

"I will," I told him.

Moller then looked at his watch with such a weary expression on his face, he seemed to be saying he'd been up for years without sleep. Slowly his fingers found buttonholes for the buttons of the stained trenchcoat. "Well, nothing more to do here. Gotta check in with the coroner for the cause of death, but I don't expect to uncover any secrets there."

"Would you mind if I stayed a few minutes longer?" I asked.

"Suit yourself, Mr. Hatton. Just don't touch or move anything in case I want to come back in the morning. And make sure the door's locked when you let yourself out."

"You have my word," I told him.

LEFT ALONE NOW, IN THE APARTMENT OF A DEAD MAN, I began to feel edgy and uneasy, like a new night janitor in a mausoleum or a police morgue-room supervisor working the graveyard shift alone and thinking he had heard noises coming from the body trays. The apartment was cold, deathly cold. Likely Moller had left the balcony doors open in the study, letting the chilly Manhattan wind sweep in like a flow of Arctic ice down a swollen river.

I started into the hallway. A thin draft of air passed me on both sides like ghosts passing my flanks and disturbing the quiet currents.

The study's overhead lights were off, but the room was still cast in a dull glow whose source I could not identify immediately. I snaked a hand around a corner of wall, found the main switch and gave it a flick and the dull cast of light was swallowed in a flood of harsher glare.

Mulvihill had built a fire in the small postage stamp fireplace, but it wasn't much to speak of now. I tossed two chunks of cedar onto the

dying coals and coaxed them ablaze. Though I'd been warned against it, I made a glove out of a handkerchief and closed the balcony doors to cut off the wind and rain. Clues were clues, I supposed; but wind was also cold and rain was also wet.

I'd been in this room many times, but now something about it struck me as being different. When my eyes swept the study walls, that difference was all at once apparent. They were bare. Mulvihill had taken down all his valuable prints and had stacked them irreverently in one corner, one atop the other like so much cordwood — the Seurats and Utrillos, the Velasquez' and Balthus', the whole lot of them relegated to a pile of anonymity.

And then I saw it: the *Salvator Mundi* — the striking, hypnotic portrait rendering of Christ, framed in gold-leaf and centered alone on the far, short wall. Across the frame's top edge was a long cowl of brass, which hooded the bar light whose rays had shone with such eerie light. The purples, reds and blacks were luscious and compelling. They seemed to penetrate the surface to a depth of miles. And the eyes of Christ: benevolent and fearsome, loving and vengeful, comforting and disquieting. I took in what could only have been a reverent gasp of air; and then, could not breathe again for what seemed like hours. he'd finally found it, then. Mulvihill had at last acquired his *Salvator Mundi*!

Beneath the painting was a wooden, hand-carved altar which stood about four feet high. Mulvihill must have paid some artist a pretty penny for that as well. But it was the painting which drew nearly all of my admiration. It was as vividly alive as Michelangelo's *The Pieta*, Mary and the bleeding Christ, sculpted and rubbed so delicately that marble became living flesh. This was another living, breathing Christ in rendition, with eyes that followed you everywhere, pious and stern, watchful for your next sinful act.

That left Mulvihill's grisly suicide over which to be troubled. If he had his elusive *Salvator Mundi*, then that meant he also had his precious attribution of the work. So if everything had come up roses for him, why was he now laid out on a cold, metal autopsy table at the county morgue? Something from the equation was missing here. To have returned to his apartment building in such desperate haste, and to have left his car parked out front with the keys in the ignition, and then to have leapt off his balcony into thin air to become a free-falling object of death — to have done all that meant something had gone terribly wrong.

I WAS STILL THE MOST PERPLEXED OF MEN AND I FREELY admitted that to myself. On Mulvihill's desk was a magnification glass *a la* Sherlock Holmes and next to it a flashlight, things which were very out of place there. Two and two seemed to want to be put together to make four.

I walked back to the painting and stared at it for several minutes. The richness of its colors all but pulled me into them, like some whirling vortex I was powerless to resist. And those *eyes*! The expression in them would have taken an average artist a lifetime to convey. I *knew* I was standing before an artist's genius, I would have bet *cold cash* on it.

And then my eyes wandered toward the lower-left corner of the painting where the left hand of the Christ held a shadowy orb of some kind, a dark crystal globe. The long, delicate fingers seemed almost to be cradling it with a touch that could not be felt. My eye descended below that hand, to the very edge of the painting. There, so faintly drawn, it seemed to appear and disappear like an optical illusion, was the fine, draftsmanlike signature, each scripted letter brimming with elegance and sweep. *Leonardo da Vinci*.

Without at first realizing I was walking in Mulvihill's footsteps, recreating his every move in that room exactly, I went to the desk and snatched up the flashlight and magnifying glass and took them back to the painting. I spotlighted the beam of the flashlight on the signature and peered up close at it through the glass. Yes, as unmistakable as any legible thing could be, that same fine hand that had been put to engineering and architectural drawings, to musical scores and scientific suppositions and equations, representing the man whose genius knew no boundaries. *Leonardo da Vinci*.

And that was why Mulvihill had changed into his robe and slippers, why he was in no hurry to kill himself. His first priority had been to arrange it all in his mind, put together the likely sequence of events, all calculated to draw him into the purchase of this particular *Salvator Mundi*. Of course there had been no abbey-hunting in Europe by the girl, Tamara Gilbert; no meticulous attribution of the painting; no exhaustive technical analyses at the Louvre in Paris and at other places; no wood grain tests at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University; none of it at all.

There was no certain way to tell precisely when the painting had been done, but it most assuredly had not been done in another century. In all likelihood, the girl had painted it. Either she, or Mulvihill's young tenant Harold Telsch, the way nearly all art students duplicated



the masters at some point in their training to test their skills and artistry. Perhaps the painting would have remained an attic-piece, a reminder of the past, a bit of forgery to be handed down to children or grandchildren like a family photo album.

But then Telsch had learned of Mulvihill's obsession with art and his misadventure with the Inverted Jennys. And what Harold Telsch saw in Mulvihill was a man with an unlimited capacity for being duped. And so Telsch and the girl had struck a limited partnership and the Mulvihill Project was born.

The signature on the painting had been a final, subtle twisting of the knife, a special cruelty that almost went beyond any known definition and use of that word.

Sadly then, I retrieved the detective's card from my wallet. A series of calls traced Lt. Moller to a lab unit a few doors from the basement morgue. Carefully I reconstructed for him the chain of events that had led to Mulvihill's suicide. When I'd finished, the detective responded there could be no charge of murder; but there was evidence of the strongest kind to gain the issuance of an arrest warrant for criminal fraud. I told the detective the girl's whereabouts were unknown to me, but that Harold Telsch was one of Claude Mulvihill's tenants at the Clifton Apartments.

I was assured he would be arrested and charged before morning.

Feeling some sense of completion, I put up the telephone and turned out the bar light above the fourteenth *Salvator Mundi*, the biggest fraud of them all. I pondered whether Mulvihill's tombstone marker should read *He died of a little knowledge* and then cast the notion aside as being one more cruelty the world did not need.

I went out onto the study balcony. The rain was driving down harder now and it felt good on my face. I could not bring myself to look down at the spot where Mulvihill had died and so I concentrated a steady gaze out at the long, glittering necklace of auto headlights streaming up and down Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive and beyond it the darkened East River. Out there somewhere, too, was Queens, but it was all but hidden from view behind the thick mists of rain.

I was thinking at that moment of da Vinci's astounding output of work, of the sheer volume in so many demanding disciplines. And I was thinking, also, how very strange it was that in the face of so much signed work, da Vinci chose to lend to the mass of his paintings not a single signature.

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*They thought he was dead, but they were dead wrong.  
The master detective came back — and he thirsted for  
vengeance!*

# Buck Danger's Revenge

by RICH RAINEY

BUCK DANGER DIED IN MANHATTAN'S LITTLE INDIA IN THE middle of a June afternoon. He was on a case. It was his last. Buck had too much gin and too many old wounds that never healed properly. At 3:45 his overworked and undernourished body went down for keeps.

His craggy face softened at last when his silver streaked hair touched the pavement. His rock hard body gave up the ghost.

The master detective was gone.

No one really noticed his demise except for Ed Gatling, who just couldn't accept it. Gatling had created Buck Danger a quarter of a century ago and put him through one hardcover adventure every year.

Buck had saved the world 25 times already but now no one wanted to know about him. Why? Ed Gatling wondered as he picked up the typing-paper box he'd dropped on a Madison Avenue sidewalk. Inside the cardboard casket was the 254 page corpse of Buck Danger in his latest adventure, *SIKH LITTLE INDIANS*.

The book was about a small band of radical Sikh separatists raising money in New York for a revolution to free the Punjab region from the rest of India. They robbed a half dozen banks, one of which was run by Buck's brother-in-law, who was killed in a shootout. Naturally Buck got involved for his sister's sake.

Ed's publisher wouldn't take the book. *Aerie House Mysteries*, his imprint from the beginning, pronounced the post mortem. The last four "Bucks" hadn't made a dollar. Why should this one be any different?

Fourteen more publishers agreed. Now Ed was down to his last two potential publishers. He had contacts at both and had made appointments for the same day.

With an hour to kill before his first appointment, Ed Gatling cooled off in a plush tavern on Madison near East 76th Street. He settled down with a few neat gins at a front window table.

He watched the crowds pass by, trying to pick out the Buck Danger fans among them. With each additional gin he was able to identify more and more fans. He couldn't disappoint them. "Come on, Buck," he said. "It's time."

*You're on, pal.*

Ed smiled, feeling for a second that the idle subconscious voice in his head belonged to Buck. He grabbed the manuscript box and hit the hot pavement again.

TEN MINUTES LATER HE STOOD IN FRONT OF THE STEEL AND smoked glass tower of Barnum Books. Barnum originally leased the first two floors. With each across-the-board blockbuster (hardcover, paperback, movie, and video cartridge) the publisher took over another floor. They currently occupied twelve floors.

At last, Ed thought. A big money outfit like this could promote Buck

**Danger in the way he deserved.**

Much like Buck, Ed was impatient with elevators. He took the stairwell and charged up five flights of stairs to his prospective editor's floor. He stated his business to the receptionist in the glassed-in security booth.

A few minutes later he was in Stan Vallee's office. The fiftyish editor shouted, "Ed Gatling! Good to see you again." He leaned over his desk to shake hands. Stan's desktop was totally bare except for a coffee mug and a pipe rack on the gleaming black surface. Behind his desk was a mountain range of books, trade magazines, and manila clad manuscripts.

Ed dropped into a comfortable soft cushioned chair across from Stan. "You're the first one in a long time to actually smile when they saw me coming."

"Hey, Ed, come on. Me and Buck Danger started out at the same time. The creator of Buck Danger is always welcome."

"Yeah? Well, that's why I'm here." He slid the manuscript box across Stan's desk.

Stan's smile widened in scope but diminished in feeling. He gently pushed the box back to Ed Gatling. "Let me be straight with you, Ed. This is a Buck Danger book, right? Well, we're not handling that kind of line any more."

Ed folded his hands in front of him, suddenly cold as a cigar store Indian. "Then why did you agree to see me?"

"You've got a lot of experience behind you, Ed. I figure if you update your style a bit, come up with a dynamic well-rounded character, drop your old fashioned plots, you can dive right into the big book arena. Expand, Ed, and I'll go the distance with you. We'll expand together."

"But I've got Buck Danger already. He's like a —"

"Drop him. Buck's had it."

*Who is this bum?*

"Relax," Ed cautioned the rising voice of Buck Danger.

"What?" Stan asked.

"Nothing," Ed said.

*Nothing is right. This bozo's got nothing to say to us. Let's split.*

Ed leaned forward and tapped a stubby finger on the desk. "I don't get it. Ten years ago you made a substantial offer for the next Buck Danger book."

"Right. But that was ten years ago." Stan Vallee lit his pipe and

puffed away his guilt. "You had a loyal following back then. But the market's changed. The readers don't go for those old fashioned gimmicky plots and quaint offbeat titles of yours. They want bigger and better and newer."

Ed shrugged. He started to get up from the chair. Buck was right. He didn't need this.

"Wait, Ed. Please! Sit down. I just want to talk with you. See, I want you to get back into the swing of things. There's so many new books out these days we got a hundred critics just to keep score, to separate the wheat from the chaff —"

"And you wanna turn me into a wheatie. Right?" Ed was getting thirsty. He wanted to go do some stiff drinking and thinking.

"Ed, I want you to take your place right up there next to Ludlum, Forsythe, and MacDonald. You can do it. I know you've got the ability. All you have to do is get rid of Buck Danger."

*Watch yourself, buddy. Better start looking over your shoulder when you talk to Buck like that.*

"He's been with me since the beginning," Ed said. "I can't cut him out like that."

*You and me, pal. We'll take 'em all on.*

Ed Gatling took the box in hand and headed for the door. Stan caught his arm. "At least do yourself a favor," he said. "Get current, Ed. Read the big sellers. And read guys like Maxwell Hughes."

"Never heard of him," Ed said.

Stan shook his head. "No wonder you're so out of style. Maxwell Hughes is *the* number one critic. He does columns for all the leading mags, for the Times. He's got his finger on the pulsebeat. He knows what's in style. Read him, Ed. Read him."

Ed Gatling hadn't read any critics since his first Buck Danger book came out. They didn't like it. They didn't like the movie either. Or the radio series. Or the short lived Buck Danger Magazine.

But Stan seemed to be sincere in helping him.

"Alright," Ed said. "I'll read some of his stuff. But I got my own pulsebeat, Stan. Remember, I made a mint in my —"

"Let me finish for you, Ed. You were about to say *in your day*. Well, the book market now is all about tomorrow stuff. Today stuff at least. Current, Ed, current. Yesterday's dead."

*Join the club.* Buck's voice was faint.

"Don't talk like that," Ed said.

"It's the truth, Ed. Find that out for yourself, then come back to me

with a proposal and together we'll expand your horizons."

ED LEFT BARNUM BOOKS. THE ONLY HORIZON HE WAS INTERESTED in at the moment was a row of neat taverns in front of him. One of them would nourish him until his next appointment an hour from now. Ed was just about to enter the London Pub when he spied a narrow fronted bookstore sandwiched between the pub and a deli.

Might as well give it a shot, he thought. He went inside, immediately heard muted classical music from hidden speakers, and knew he was in the right place. This kind of store didn't stock mysteries, science fiction, or any other lowly genre fiction. But critics, yes. There were hundreds of overwordy tomes weighing down the bookshelves.

He approached a cardigan-clad bearded man who was reading *The New York Review of Books* behind the cash register counter.

The clerk frowned when he noticed Ed Gatling's wrinkled white shirt rolled to the elbows. He obviously didn't expect a sale from the silver haired, craggy faced man.

"Do you have anything by Maxwell Hughes?"

"Of course!" His face brightened at the realization that his customer was a quite perceptive sort after all. He grabbed a thick paperback titled *Hughes Who*. "Here," he said. "It's a collection of columns for the past year. Believe me, anyone worth watching in film, stage, or print, is profiled in here."

"Sounds like a real page-turner," Ed said. He paid for the book and brought it with him to the London Pub. He leafed through the book at random while downing a couple of gins . . . and felt a cold chill when he saw his name mentioned in one of the columns.

"What am I doing in there?" he asked. He read on and found that Hughes had idly mentioned him in passing. It wasn't a favorable mention at all. Hughes was praising a thriller writer who had the good grace to elevate his genre fiction almost to the heights of a real novel. However, Hughes had one caution. "Although Olson shows such promising signs as a stylist he simply must pump some life and blood into his characters. Otherwise, his oeuvre will be tainted by cardboard heroes as ridiculous as Buck Danger. Poor Ed Gatling. He never learned how to do better than Buck Danger. Let's hope that Olson doesn't follow Gatling's well deserved ride to oblivion . . ."

Ed Gatling shook his head as if he'd been slapped. He fanned through the paperback and saw his name mentioned several more times. It was like Hughes was on a vendetta against him. Why single

him out? He couldn't believe the number of digs and stabs in the back the critic aimed at him. There wasn't any more time to catalog the crimes. He had five minutes to make his next appointment.

Gatling was out of shape for the long haul, but his rock hard body could handle a two-minute sprint. He ran down Madison Avenue with the Buck Danger manuscript box and the *Hughes Who* paperback tucked under his arm. The paperback skidded out of his grasp when he hurried across a wide street against the green light. It smacked the dry road, kicked up a cloud of dust, and slid down a sewer grate.

*Bon Voyage, crumb.*

FUNNY WHAT THE SUBCONSCIOUS COULD DO, ED THOUGHT. He finished his sprint one minute early and stood before the Muriel Press offices. They had the third and fourth floors of a regal stone-faced building guarded by 100 year old gargoyles.

He was breathing hard when he approached a red haired receptionist. "Ed . . . Gatling," he said, gasping between every word. "Here . . . to, uh, see . . . Joe Evans."

"Mr. Evans is no longer with us."

"What? I just talked to him last week! He was interested in —"

"Gloria Travers is the new editor handling his authors. I'll tell her you're here." She plugged the switchboard and spoke into her mouthpiece. Then she turned back to Ed Gatling. "She's in the middle of a conference. You'll have to wait about fifteen minutes."

Ed sat on a plush velour covered modular couch and wondered what happened to Joe Evans. Evans was about his age, a hard drinking, harsh talking friend from way back. He and Ed had shared a table three years running at the MWA conventions. Now Evans was gone. Maybe he talked too harshly to the wrong person.

*Don't worry about a thing, pal. Just let me do the talking. I'll charm the new babe eight ways from Sunday.*

That's all I need, Ed thought. Go in like Buck Danger, fists forward and pistols primed. He'd have to handle this smoothly. Gloria Travers was his last hope. Buck didn't know just how much danger he was actually in.

A few minutes after Ed Gatling's arrival a man in his mid-thirties headed for the receptionist. He had a well trimmed Van Dyke, thin silver-rimmed glasses, and a gold plated pen and pencil clipped to his light blue jacket.

"Afternoon, Kristine," he said. "Is my gal Gloria in?"

"Hold on, Mr. Hughes." She conferred with the editor, then said. "Go right in, Mr. Hughes. She's waiting for you in her office."

Ed couldn't be sure, but it seemed like Hughes looked his way just long enough to get his attention before the receptionist buzzed him through the twin doors that led to the editorial offices.

Ed patted the manuscript box beside him, as if the dull sound could snap him from a dream, or insure that he was awake. It was eerie. He'd never heard of Maxwell Hughes until earlier this afternoon. Now he'd bought his book, and had actually seen him in person. In fact, not only was Hughes cutting him down in print, he was cutting into his time in real life — coying up to Gloria Travers at this very moment.

It was impossible. It couldn't be happening.

*Relax. It's just that old synchronicity jazz. The eggheads toss it around all the time. Sounds like a lotta bunk, but it does happen, pal.*

Sure, Ed thought. It happened a lot. In books. Nothing wrong with that. Nearly every one of the Buck Danger books hinged on a series of improbable coincidences. But in real life . . . that was too much to be hit with at once. Especially since Hughes was so intent on destroying his already fading career.

Maxwell Hughes. It sounded familiar. And Hughes even looked familiar, but that could be because of the photo on the back of the paperback. Or did Ed run into him somewhere before . . . Did he unknowingly create an enemy who turned out to be in a position to do him harm?

But where and when could he have clashed with Hughes?

He remembered skimming the introduction to *Hughes Who* where Hughes had prattled on about his days as a young reviewer and reporter for a newspaper. Maybe that's where they tangled, Ed thought. Reporters were constantly weaseling junkets to New York from their editors, and Ed Gatling certainly ran into hordes of reporters during Buck Danger's glory days.

He tried to imagine Maxwell Hughes as a younger man without the beard and not so splendid clothes. He searched his gin-blurred memory for a green reporter who might have annoyed him.

He found several vague memories of scuffles with reporters, drunken shouting matches and a few actual fights. But Hughes? He wasn't the type. He was too busy pandering to the academia nuts with his precious columns to even realize he had a fist.

Ed Gatling glanced at the now empty corridor that Maxwell Hughes



had just walked through, as if he could snatch the ghost of his past and give him the third degree.

He remembered! There was a pack of junketing reporters taking their turn at interviewing him in a Park Avenue bar, about ten years ago, when the fourth Buck Danger movie was being made.

A real lame reviewer sat at his table for an interview. He was the only reporter he'd ever seen drinking tea inside a bar. And the guy asked him about the dichotomy between Buck Danger's anima and animus. What happened after that was vague. Maybe Gatling laughed him out of the bar, or maybe he even grabbed him by the collar and threw him out the front door. There was some kind of flare-up that meant nothing to Gatling at the time. But maybe it meant everything to the reviewer. His ego was on the line and perhaps it wouldn't be salvaged until he destroyed Ed Gatling.

Preposterous, Ed thought at first. He could remember the incident but not the reviewer. Perhaps Maxwell Hughes was a thousand miles away at the time.

*Don't let your guard down. He's the one. It fits.*

Ed listened to the inner voice. It was right. Too many coincidences were piling on top of one another. It was time to unmask coincidence and realize that it was design. A conspiracy was at work. Ed Gatling was the target.

But Ed wasn't easy. There was more at stake here than a book. There was a life involved. *Two lives.*

"Mr. Gatling. Gloria will see you now."

ED WENT TO THE DOUBLE DOORS. THEY OPENED INWARD and he saw Gloria Travers. His shock at her beauty must have shown. She smiled and introduced herself, before beckoning him down another hall.

She had long black hair that curved in at the shoulders. Gloria looked no more than 25. Right out of grad school, probably with a post doctorate in exotic dancing. What was she doing here?

She was doing *well*. He followed her to a corner office that included a separate conference room to the side. The door was partially open, revealing a gleaming onyx capped conference table.

Gloria Travers had most definitely arrived.

Gloria crossed her legs behind her desk and rapped a stilletto thin letter opener on her phone. She looked at the manuscript box like it

was contagious. If opened it would spread more Stygian illnesses than the Pandora.

Ed picked up on it. "Joe Evans said to bring it on down. He said he was interested in acquiring the next few Buck Danger books."

"Mmmmmn . . . Yes, I know. He left me a memo on it." She tipped up the lid of the manuscript box with a glossy red fingernail and peered inside. "Sikh Little Indians. It's quaint. But, Ed?" She leaned over her desk, bringing with her a lilac scent, an overpowering glimpse of cleavage, and an unmouthed kiss of doom.

Ed looked into her eyes. He had the feeling she wanted him to apologize for being there. "What is it?"

"I think Joe Evans was a bit sauced when he spoke with you. He's from the old school, you know. Hard drinker, hell raiser. That old fashioned stuff."

"What are you saying?" Ed demanded.

"I'm saying that I think Buck Danger's shot his bolt, Ed. His audience has gone on to slicker material."

"Not so," Ed said. "Buck's got a lot of mileage in him. He's got a lot more cases to bust."

"Does he?" Gloria asked. "How can anyone be left? By now he's used up every last friend and relative."

"That's a cheap shot."

"Face it," Gloria said. "Buck's saved his sisters, his first, second, and third wives, the girl next door, and all of his cousins. Just how big a family does Buck Danger have?"

"The Family of Man," Ed said.

"Perhaps," Gloria admitted. "Too bad the immediate family isn't buying any of his books. He's just not modern enough, Ed. He's archaic."

Ed shook his head. Buck's virtue was that he *wasn't* modern enough. He was a black and white, black and blue kind of guy. He got knocked on the head every other chapter or so, but he always managed to blast the bad guy in the last chapter. Buck had guts, goodness, and coincidence on his side. Archaic, hell . . . unless decency was obsolete.

Gloria looked like she was ready to coat him with some syrupy rejection when a red light on her phone started flashing. She spoke a few words, listened, then said, "I'll be right there."

She turned to Ed and said, "You'll excuse me for a moment, won't you?" He nodded. The gorgeous brunette was almost out of the office when she stopped in midstride. She came back to the desk, took a stack

of folders from her six-tiered tray, and dropped them in her top drawer. "Be right back," she said.

*The dame's trying to hide something,* an inner voice said. *Go ahead. Take a look. Don't let her put something over on us.*

Ed folded his arms across his chest and sat still. He wasn't a snoop, but Buck Danger had been in this situation often enough to know how to act.

*Trust me. It may be a set-up, but we've got to look at it.*

Ed opened the drawer and leafed through the folders. He found one labeled in loving calligraphy, Max. He looked inside.

*This is it. This is the payoff.*

HIS INSTINCTUAL VOICE WAS RIGHT. THE FOLDER CONTAINED almost 30 photocopied galleys, all of them from Maxwell Hughes' columns. The columns all had titles like "Around Town With Maxwell Hughes," "Artists Just So-So in Soho," and "Art of the State: Subversive Satire in Soviet SciFi."

Ed scanned several columns. Like most critics, Maxwell Hughes didn't unveil his subject until 700 words or so of incomprehensible meanderings. Then he turned into a cannibal and savaged whatever poor soul happened to be out of style that week.

The most recent column was about mystery writers, called "Poverty-Stricken Prose," in which he urged a score of mystery writers to retire. Again, he gave a special mention to Ed Gatling.

While waffling on and on about the need for verite in crime fiction, he ridiculed Ed Gatling for trotting out the same old ubiquitous .38, book after book, year after year. Hughes lampooned him for a paragraph or two before recommending that the modern hero dispatch his antagonist with a realistically defined weapon . . . "For example, a SIG-Sauer P230 fixed-barrel blowback automatic chambered for the 9mm Police cartridge would perform quite nicely. And won't someone please tell Mr. Gatling that villains simply don't get killed by a plain old .38."

Hughes ended the column with the good news that today's informed reader would no longer stand for such trash as a Buck Danger book. Even better, Hughes wrote, what publisher in his right mind would print such garbage?

*This guy's got us by the throat.*

Ed dropped the folder back into Gloria's top desk drawer when he heard her talking out loud in the hall. He sat back and smiled inno-

cently while she waltzed back to her desk. She sat down and once more crossed her legs.

"Sorry for the interruption," she said. "But something *important* came up."

He nodded. And once again he felt a chill. There was a sound coming from the small conference room at the side of her large office. Someone was in there. Maxwell Hughes hadn't left. He'd stayed behind to watch Gloria tap the last nail in Buck Danger's coffin.

*The dirty ghoul.*

"As I was about to say earlier," Gloria said. She caressed the manuscript box. "We could publish the latest Buck Danger book, Ed, but it would be a disservice to you. It could only do you harm."

"Pain's good for the soul," Ed said.

She smiled. "Of course it is," she agreed. "But to publish another Buck Danger would be the most sadistic act in the history of publishing. It just wouldn't be fair to the reader."

Ed reached for the box. There was nothing left to say. He slapped it under his arm and headed for the door.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head like he was a child who simply couldn't face reality. "I'm afraid that Buck Danger's oeuvre, such as it is, is complete."

He closed the door and immediately heard a howl of delight. Maxwell Hughes came out of hiding and joined Gloria in laughter.

The critic had finally evened the score.

UPPER WESTCHESTER WAS HOME FOR SEVERAL SUCCESSFUL writers, publishers, and a few critics who had managed to turn their sluggish prose into dollars. The most notable critic in the area was Maxwell Hughes.

His rustic designer-farmhouse had been completely rebuilt. One entire floor was devoted to an elitist's library, complete with long tables, a smoking room, and for visiting scholars and authors there was an index contained in several cabinets.

Maxwell frequently entertained the right publishers who were perceptive enough to see the need for books of criticism. He also entertained magazine editors who no longer read his columns but published them anyway for the stamp of legitimacy as "serious journals of inquiry" it gave them.

There were guests at the rural retreat nearly every night.

But on Wednesdays there was only one guest. Gloria Travers. She

came at six in the evening and left at midnight for the short drive back to the city.

On the fourth Wednesday of July, at midnight, Maxwell Hughes kissed Gloria, bundled her into her car, and waved lovingly as she rode down the long driveway to the main road.

He took one more puff on his pipe and sighed when she was out of sight.

That's when he felt a cold metal circle jabbed into the back of his neck.

His hands shot up. The pipe fell to the gravel drive and spit out sweet smelling embers. "Who are you?" he asked. His teeth chattered like it was January instead of July.

The man with the gun backed him inside, then closed the door. He spun Maxwell around.

The critic stared in disbelief when he recognized the armed and obviously dangerous man. The eyes were glazed. The craggy face was chiseled into a mask that left no room for mercy.

"What do you want?" Maxwell asked. A whining tone crept into his voice. "Look, I didn't mean to ruin you this bad. We can talk this over. We can, we can — " Words failed him. He stared at the revolver. "Come on, what do you want? What is it?"

"It's a .38," he said. He fired three times. Maxwell's acid tongue fell silent forever as he crumpled to the polished hardwood floor, dead in his silk bathrobe.

BUCK DANGER POCKETED THE .38 AND RAN OUT INTO THE darkness. He didn't waste any time thinking about the corpse in the farmhouse.

Buck had to get back to town before his fourth ex-wife went nuts. Her sister had written a best selling book called TOTALLY FEMININE that advised housewives to greet hubby at the door in tassles and a G-string. She'd been killed when someone ran her new Rolls off the road. The cops thought it was an accident but Buck knew it was murder.

By the time he reached the main road, Buck realized that Ed Gatling was nowhere in sight. It didn't bother him. Ed would come around. He was always there when you needed him. Ed Gatling was his kind of guy. Buck hurried down the desolate road, already concentrating on the case he was going to call THE TOTALED WOMAN. ●

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*It was an unusual will, to say the least, but then his uncle was an unusual person. So what? If he did this right, in two days he'd be richer by three hundred thousand dollars!*

# Belfrey's Bats

by PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

ROBERT BELFREY STEPPED INTO THE OFFICE SOMEWHAT surprised. He had pictured a lawyer's office in an old southern town to be no more than an antique shop, full of turn-of-the-century furnishing and fixtures. Yet, the old town had quite a few new buildings, and the office was located in the newest and most modern in the downtown area. A thick carpet covered the floor, one wall was taken up by book shelves, the others done in blond oak paneling which matched the desk. Two black leather chairs sat at both corners in front of the desk. Behind the desk stood quite a dapper Tylor Haddle. His suit light blue, complete with vest and matching tie. He had a full head of silver gray hair, and a broad genuine smile.

Sheriff Synon had met Robert at the bus depot and accompanied him to the lawyer's office. Synon hadn't disappointed Robert in what he thought a southern sheriff would look like, pot-bellied, balding,

chewing on a wad of tobacco.

Haddle asked them to sit, and sitting himself, said, "First let me extend my condolences in the loss of your parents and your uncle."

Robert thanked him, thinking of how strange it all had been. A little more than two months ago his parents had died in a fire at their home in Maine. The place was completely demolished and he too would have died if he had not spent the night with a friend. He had written his uncle about the deaths. It was his first attempt to contact his uncle. Due to the fact that his uncle and father had not spoken to each other for over twenty-five years, since before he was born. It all centered around a fight that his father and uncle had, which his father had never gone into detail about. His only reply had come last week from Tylor Haddle stating that his uncle, too, was dead, and the will would be read as soon as he could make arrangements to come to town.

Haddle handed an envelope across the desk to him. "As you can see, your uncle stipulated that the sheriff be present at the reading."

"Go on an' open'er up, boy," Sheriff Synon said. "I've been wantin' to learn what was in there ever since Tylor showed it ta me."

There was writing on the envelope, uneven, barely legible. It read: *The contents, my will, to be read by my nephew, Robert Belfrey, in the presence of my trusted friend and lawyer, Tylor Haddle, and Sheriff Synon, who will see to it that the provisions I set forth are enforced.*

Robert turned the envelope over to find the flap was not only sealed but additionally secured with cellophane tape along its edges.

"Here, use this," Haddle said, passing him a letter opener. "I'm rather anxious to hear what Jacob wrote, myself."

He took the opener and used it in one slash, removed two folded sheets of paper. The writing was the same as that on the envelope, perhaps a little clearer. As he leaned back to read he realized all was quiet. Haddle and the sheriff sat motionless, waiting. He read aloud. " *Robert, I shall not pretend to have any love for you, because I can not forgive your father for taking away the woman that was mine. And yet, I cannot really blame you. I have learned from my doctor that I do not have long to live. And it is because I am near death that I write this will. I do not want to pass on without some measure of atonement. I've had Tylor sell my businesses, and transfer all my bonds into cash. The sum, with what I previously had in the bank comes to \$387,000. The \$87,000 is still in the bank of which \$35,000 goes to Tylor, \$20,000 to Sheriff Synon, and the remainder to Meg and her boy. As for the*

*\$300,000, I have hidden it in the mansion. You will have forty-eight hours to find it. If you succeed, the money, the mansion, and all the property is yours. If you fail, then the mansion goes to Meg, and the money, if ever it is found will be divided equally between her, Tylor, and the sheriff. If you need any help just ask the bats; they know the answer'."*

The post script was the only thing on the second page. He read this aloud also. "Your forty-eight hours starts at this moment'."

"Well," the sheriff said, laughing. "When Jacob makes a will he really makes one. Twenty thousand dollars," he smiled. "I thank you, Jacob, where ever you are." Then he looked at his pocket watch. "It's four thirty-five now. So that means that on Friday at this same time, Tylor an' I'll be out to the mansion ta see what you've found ifen it's anythin'."

Two days, Robert thought, *To find three hundred thousand dollars.* It was crazy. "Just how binding is this will?" he asked.

Haddle shrugged. "It is your uncle's hand writing. To contest it, you have to prove that he was incompetent. Now although many people in this town have always said your uncle Jacob was crazy, proving it to the satisfaction of the court is another matter."

"I see," said Robert, wondering just how much support he would get if he contested the will, seeing as how his uncle had entrenched Haddle and the sheriff in the will's provisions. "Who is this Meg?"

"An old housekeeper Jacob had witt him for years," the sheriff said. "Worked for him before her son, Hicks, was even born, I hear. Hicks, must be 'bout your age, boy, twenty, twenty-two. Some say it was a contest tween him and your uncle as ta which was the craziest."

"And what was this about bats?"

"Your uncle took to collecting them some years back," Haddle answered. "Nobody know what started him. Damn vampire bats at that. Jacob used to feed them on chickens, but every now and then some of them would fly down here to town. I was bit once myself."

Robert tried to resist the impulse, but the urge was too great. He leaned forward, looking for the two tell-tale puncture marks that would be on Haddle's neck.

Haddle laughed aloud. "You've been watching too many horror movies, young man. The vampire bat doesn't suck blood through hollow teeth. He takes a small shallow bite, and licks the blood as it flows out. I was bit on the nose in my sleep, and didn't even know it until I awoken the next morning."



"One of 'em nipped me on my big toe once," the sheriff said. "They got ta half the folks in town fore they got sense 'nough ta keep their doors and windas shut at night. And gettin' rid of them bats was out. Nobody in town had guts 'nough ta ask it of Jacob.

"He loved them bats so I guess that's why he had his self buried down there with 'em."

"He what?" Robert asked, not quite sure he understood just what the sheriff had said.

"I was going to tell you about that," Haddle said. "Your uncle kept the bats in the cellar of the mansion, and he requested to be buried there with them."

"He's buried in the cellar?" he asked. "Isn't that against some law?"

Haddle shrugged. "There is a question of sanitation. But you must remember your uncle just about owned this town. Being buried in the cellar was a dying request, and nobody voiced any opposition."

"I see," he said, His uncle had been quite a character. He was not sure what he would find when he came to town, but it was nothing like what had transpired thus far. "Well, gentlemen, I guess I'd better get to the mansion," he said, standing. "The money's not going to find me."

"Just a minute longer," Haddle said. "Sheriff, if you would give us a moment alone."

"Sure," the sheriff said with a shrug. "I wanted a chance ta talk ta that secretary of yours, anyway."

WHEN THE SHERIFF HAD LEFT THE OFFICE, ROBERT RESEATED himself, and Haddle said, "I feel I can't let you go without some warning."

Warning? Now what, more bat stories?

"How much do you know about the feud between your father and uncle?"

"Not much," he admitted. "Dad and mom wouldn't talk about it. And I never met my uncle. I was just told that I had an uncle, this was the town that he and dad grew up in, and that he and dad never got along."

"Well, that's not quite true," Haddle said. "They got along very good until your mother came along. She was Jacob's girl first. But, she and your father fell in love. They told Jacob, there was a fight, he nearly killed your father. That same night your father and mother left

town, got married, settled down back east. A few years later you were born. I can tell you the address of their first apartment, the amount of your father's first pay check. I can tell you those things because Jacob retained me to have them found, and to keep periodical checks on the three of you all these years."

Haddle paused as though waiting for him to ask a question, but there was no question he wanted to ask. He was just anxious for Haddle to finish his story about a part of his family he had not known.

"Jacob never left this town, with the exception of a trip he took about two months ago. He didn't tell me where he had gone, but upon his return he informed me that we wouldn't be needing to keep checks on the three of you any longer. I was curious, looked into it myself, and learned of the fire."

Haddle had not said it, but his inference was clear. Haddle believed that his uncle was the cause of his mother's and father's death.

"Well, if what you say is true, Mr. Haddle, I guess it's ended now. I mean, my uncle is dead, isn't he?" And there is the three hundred thousand dollars, isn't there?"

"Yes, he is dead. And the money is there somewhere. It's just that he was a man infested with hate. He never forgave your parents for what he felt they did to him. I can't help but think he might have turned that hatred toward you, the son that could have been his. And that this whole thing is just a last attempt to get at you." Haddle paused once more. He had lost some of his early composure. His hair seemed rather ruffled, a noticeable strain in his expression. "Be careful, Robert."

He was aware of the sheriff gabbing about local gossip as they drove to the mansion. But he couldn't give him much attention. Haddle's warning was the most prominent thing in his thoughts. He knew there was no need to worry. The dead can not harm the living. Yet, the warning stayed with him.

THE MANSION WAS A HUGE TWO-STORY STRUCTURE. FOUR stone pillars held up the balcony which ran the length of the front of the building. It had probably been white once, now the dirt was in such abundance it looked more a charcoal grey. And the grounds about the place was unattended as well, the grass and hedges overgrown.

As they pulled up in front of the mansion, the door opened. The woman who came out was stout, with a full cheeked face. The apron and dress she wore seemed peculiarly clean and spotless against the

background of the mansion.

She came down the short flight of stairs as they stepped from the car. "Af'noon, Sheriff. This here must be Mista Robert?"

"That's right, Meg. Here on a little treasure hunt," the sheriff said, briefly explained to Meg the terms of the will.

"Ya mean Mista Jacob hid his money in the house?"

"That's what he said he did with it."

She shook her head. "I hope you find it, Mista Robert, I don't know what I'd do with so much money."

"I'm going to do my best," he said, pleased at her reaction. He had anticipated some trouble, or at least a bit of hostility.

"My boy's 'round here somewhere," she said. "That Hicks gets funny notions and disappears most of the day. If'n ya just leave your bags here, I'll find him and have him put them in ya room for ya."

"It won't be necessary, Meg, I've only got this one with me," he said, patting his small suitcase. It was all he brought with him. He had thought about bringing his paints along. The countryside offered a wealth of subjects to capture on canvas, but he definitely didn't have time for that now.

The sheriff climbed back into his car, waved and drove off. Robert followed Meg into the mansion.

The interior of the mansion was as immaculate as though it had been freshly waxed, the walls recently washed. The staircase began just off a pair of sliding doors on his right. On his left a draped archway, and another pair of sliding doors on the wall across from the entrance. There were paintings hanging on each wall, none the works of masters, but of fair students of the art. Robert felt he could've done better.

Meg lead him upstairs.

"This was Mista Jacob's room," she said, stopping at the door a moment before going in. "It's the only fittin' room in the place for ya."

He followed her, sitting his suitcase down next to an old chest of drawers. "If'n you like, I kin whip ya up some food."

"I'd appreciate that, Meg. Just a couple of sandwiches, I don't want to waste anymore time."

She closed the door behind her as she left, and he looked about the room. It was quite ordinary, just another bedroom. The portrait hanging over the bed was the shocker though; it was of his mother. It was her as a young woman, a beauty, her golden hair down to her shoulders. Seeing the portrait brought back the emptiness he felt after learning of his parents' death, losing them both so suddenly.

There was a certain part of him that would never be mended.

The portrait being here showed the love his uncle had for his mother, not the hate Haddle spouted off about. There was nothing to Haddle's warning, no reason for Robert to concern himself with it. But his father and uncle hadn't spoken to each other in years. There was no love there.

He took a deep breath. He couldn't let himself think of them any longer, not just now anyway. He was just getting more confused, and he had the money to find.

HE BEGAN HIS SEARCH IN THE ROOM. REMEMBERING THE will said the bats knew the answer, he looked for anything pertaining to bats. He was in the closet, standing on his suitcase so he could reach the top shelf, when the door slammed shut. The sound alone almost toppled him. And for a second he thought of Haddle's warning again, of the door being locked, and someone pouring gasoline over the room. But when he grabbed the knob the door opened freely.

The big guy standing there was showing an abundance of teeth with his grin. "Kinda gave ya a start, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did," he said, smiling more at what he had thought than in the humor of the act.

"Ma tole me to bring this up to ya," he said, pointing to the desk where two thick sandwiches and a glass of milk sat on a tray.

"You're Hicks, then?"

"That's me." He was a husky six foot plus. He had his mother's full cheeks, and a thick unruly mane that hung over his forehead.

"Ya're a skinny little somethin'," Hicks said, grinning. "I look more like your uncle than ya does."

"I know," Robert told him. The sheriff had made a similar comment. He didn't like being referred to as skinny, thinking of himself as only small framed. However, he explained, "In physical appearance my uncle and father were somewhat opposite, I've learned." He bit into one of the sandwiches, finding it to be ham and very tasty.

"Ma also tole me why ya're here."

"Glad she did. Where do you think the best hiding place would be?"

Hicks' grin broadened. "I hide ma piggy bank out by the ol' stump."

"The only clue I have was that my uncle said the bats knew."

"Well, they's in the cellar with your uncle. I use to feed'em regular, but I ain't did much of that since he been buried there. Daid people

bothers me," Hicks said. Then his eyes widened, he tilted his head to one side as though listening to something far away. He grinned more, nodded his head, turned, and ran out of the room.

Robert was left recalling the comparison Sheriff Synon had made of his uncle and Hicks. And if his uncle was as crazy as Hicks seemed to be, then Haddle's warning became more sound. A vengeful person is twice as dangerous if insane.

He finished his sandwiches and milk, continued with the search. He looked under things, behind them, pounded on walls for hollows, but found nothing. To extend his search to any other room on that floor, he discovered, was useless. His uncle's bedroom was the only room that was not cluttered with dust. It would not have been impossible for anyone to enter, hide the money, and not leave a clear trail.

He went downstairs, started with the sliding doors at the bottom of the staircase. They lead to a library. Books crammed the shelves on each of its four walls. He searched the desk that sat in the center of the room, the books, tested the walls behind them. But again nothing. He could not find even one book concerning bats. He was getting tired, too. This was only his second room, and it had taken him more than three hours to search them both.

Next, he went to the foyer, soon learning that it was among the five rooms on that floor that was cleaned regularly. Besides the library, the living room, the kitchen, Meg's bedroom, and her son's, the rest of the rooms were just as dusty as those upstairs. It seemed quite peculiar to him, as he sat in the kitchen while Meg prepared dinner. He asked her about it. Her reply was that she cleaned the rooms which were used. It was a simple answer, one that made sense, and yet, did not.

After dinner, he searched each room a second time. He tried to do a more thorough job than before, but the thrill of the search was gone. It became somewhat boring. When he had finished, he was still not sure if there was something he'd overlooked. But the prospect of a third venture, at present was not pleasing. There was only one place which he had not looked, and before a third search of the rooms, he was going to look there. In the cellar, where his uncle's grave and the bats awaited.

"I'd gets some sleep first," Meg advised, after he told her he was going into the cellar. "Ya look like ya could use some."

He was sleepy, but he could not afford the time, "Later, Meg, when this is all over."

She shook her head. "Just tryin' to look out for ya. But if ya're

bound on going down there now best be careful.”

“Careful, why?”

“Them bats, I ain’t had time to feed them lately. Hicks was ‘pose to do it, but he ain’t been down there since Mista Jacob was buried.”

“What harm could those bats be?”

“A mighty bit of harm, if’n they all swoop down on ya. Ya should see what they did to the chickens we use’t feed’em on. Course they won’t jump ya long as ya stays near the lamp, and keep moving about.”

“Lamp,” he said, feeling less and less confident about entering the cellar. “You mean there’re no electric lights down there?”

“Use to be, but Mista Jacob had the current cut off. He said he didn’t need any no how. Lights would hurt them bats’s eye.”

HE WASN’T HAPPY WITH THE PROSPECT OF GOING INTO THE cellar, but then as he thought more about it, the cellar was probably the most likely place for the money to be hidden. The entrance to the cellar was in the kitchen. Meg got him a lamp, a battery operated model. He bid her good-night and started his descent.

From the top of the stairs, he could feel the warmth, smell the odd musty rottenness of the air, hear the mouse-like sounds of the bats. He held the lamp high before him and looked down the staircase. It was quite a distance to the dirt floor below, twenty feet, he guessed maybe more.

The stairs were narrow, yet solid. The warmth seemed to close about him more with each step downward. He began to perspire, breathing became difficult from the mustiness in the air, nausea played with him. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs trying to adjust himself to the new climate. He loosened his tie, tried to regulate his breathing, but it didn’t seem to help.

The lamp penetrated only a small portion of the blackness, himself the center of a circle of dim light. He still heard the bats, but had not seen them, nor could he see his uncle’s grave. He decided the best method of search would be first along the walls to check for loose bricks. If that did not work, then a criss-cross pattern across the floor of the cellar.

He had only gone a little way along the slimy brick wall, when he heard a flutter. He ducked just as something swooped over his head. The bats had started. He stayed in the crouched position, listening for more fluttering of wings but heard none. Then he saw something on the ground. It looked like a bunch of black and white feathers at first.

But he soon realized it was the remains of a chicken. The blackness was its own dried blood, and tiny bugs crawled upon the carcass. He turned away, fighting to contain himself.

Three hundred thousand dollars. The thought of it helped him regain his composure. How many daring deeds had been done for much less? And all it required of him, besides finding the money, was to endure the dreariness of the mansion, especially this cellar.

The cellar. He began to think earnestly, once more recalling his uncle's only clue: the bats know the answer. The cellar was the only place in the mansion where there were bats. For them to know where the money was, then they must have seen him when he hid it. Thus, the money was somewhere down here, perhaps only a few feet from where he stood.

WITH MORE DETERMINATION NOW HE WENT ON WITH THE search. He checked each brick carefully, coming to places where partitioning had once been affixed but was removed to create a single large chamber. He looked at his watch when he had made a complete circuit of the wall coming back to the staircase. It had taken him more than an hour to inspect the walls. During which he had ducked four times from swooping bats, heard others flying somewhere in the darkness near by. He was feeling more and more tired, somewhat drowsy from the lack of sleep. The heat of the place compounding this feeling. And there was something else racing within him, fear.

He began a search of the dirt floor, starting from one wall, crossing over to the opposite one, then back again. The void beyond the lamp seemed to be even darker somehow. He came across scattered wooden boards, more dead chickens in worse condition than the first one he saw. There were beams which supported the floor of the mansion. He inspected those thoroughly and the dirt about their bases. And there was the grave.

He was aware his own pulse rate increased as he came upon it. It was a shabby sight, a small mound of earth before a dull headstone. Engraved on the square block of limestone only his uncle's name, the years of his birth and death. He wondered who had come to the funeral, and how they must have felt to witness such a strange thing.

He searched the rest of the cellar, finding no more than he had before. Yet he had used another two hours of his time. He wiped the sweat from his brow. He had become sticky with perspiration. The stink of the place was in his nostrils, his mouth. It was as if he could

taste the rottenness of the chickens. Another bat flew by. He swung at it this time, the tips of his fingers touching the little furry body.

A chill went up his arm and through his whole body.

Enough, he'd had it. He started for the stairs at a run, the lamp illuminating the ground before him. There was a sensation within him, something that wanted to make him scream, shout, cry out for rest, for the cool of a glass of water. He ran wildly, becoming confused, he would never get out. He stumbled, tried to right himself, but fell face first onto the ground.

The lamp skidded away from him, throwing him more in shadows than anything else. He cursed himself, he was really acting silly. He was starting to let the cellar and the bats get the best of him. He started to get up, and realized he had fallen onto his uncle's grave.

It came to him in that instant. So, clear he was sure it had to be. The money was down there, with his uncle in the grave.

He dug with his fingers at first, starting at the center of the grave. The dirt was soft, but the process was slow. He looked and found one of the boards he had seen earlier. Discarding his shirt for more comfort, using the board he dug much faster, ignoring another pass by one of the bats.

The coffin had not been placed deep, but by the time he cleared its lid, he was aching all over and he was drenched in perspiration. The coffin itself was no more than a pine box. He knelt at the side of the grave, reaching down, and raised the lid.

The first things that he saw were the coal black eyes staring upward, so black appearing almost hollow. Cast in a frame of tight waxy skin, sunken in at the jaws. And on the lips a broad wrinkled smile.

The money was there, in bundles scattered about the body, but he could not touch it. He could not reach down and take the money while those eyes watched him, while those lips smiled at some secret he did not know.

Then he heard it, a noise that caused him to shiver. Not the flutter of bat's wings.

He heard breathing . . . .

SHERIFF SYNON STOOD IN THE KITCHEN OF THE BELFREY mansion pouring himself another cup of coffee. "Damn shame," he said.

Taylor nodded, sitting across the small table from Meg, whose eyes were red from crying.



"I ain't never seen anything like that," Meg said. "Poor Mista Robert."

Synon had never seen anything like it either. Robert Belfrey must have gone a little crazy himself searching for all that money. Why he'd dug up the grave Synon couldn't guess. Hell, there was nothing there but Ol' Jacob's smiling corpse.

It would be a question left unanswered. The undertaker's hearse was on its way back to town with what remained of Robert Belfrey. Damn bats. The town folk would certainly demand they be destroyed now.

It was obvious what happened to Robert. Somehow, after digging up the grave he slipped and fell backward striking his head on the coffin. Unconscious and unable to defend himself the bats had attacked. He had been bitten hundreds of times. One of the bites, a severe infliction of a vein in his left wrist had caused him to bleed to death.

"Ya know of course," Synon said, "that money's still around here somewheres for us ta find."

"I hadn't forgotten," Tylor said.

"I'm gonna put that at the top of my priority list," Synon said, trying to hide his grin with his coffee cup. "I got a lot of plans for that money when I get my hands on it. What 'bout ya, Meg?"

She looked up at him shrugging. "I — I ain't thought 'bout it."

"Better start. Why ya and Hicks can — Say, where is Hicks anyway?"

HICKS WATCHED FROM THE MASTER BEDROOM AS THE sheriff and Tylor Haddle started back to town. The money was safely tucked away by the old stump where he kept his piggy bank. In a couple of weeks he'd "stumble" across it, and the sheriff and Haddle would look upon Robert Belfrey's death as a blessing. He laughed out loud. Laughed until tears rolled from his eyes. It had been so easy to knock Robert Belfrey out, and with a small screw driver duplicate the mark left by a bat's bite.

"Fools," he shouted after them, then ran down the hall laughing even louder.

He continued the laughter all the way into the cellar. The grave had been recovered, and the fresh turned earth felt cool to his face as he lay upon the mound.

"It worked," he whispered, gently patting the grave. "Just like ya said it would, papa." ●

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*Joe wasn't superstitious, yet he had to shudder. Imagine, renting a room where a guy slit his throat with a razor!*

# An Incident at the Jersey Shore

by LEE DUIGON

THE NIGHT WAS YOUNG AND THE BLONDE WAS WILLING, SO Joe Verners paid the tab for both of them and led her out to the parking lot. Emerging from the hot, crowded bar into the cool, empty night was like a rebirth. They both remarked on it.

"Whew! My ears are still ringing! I feel like I just came out of a shower that was on too hard and too long."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Joe said. "I read somewhere that music, when it's played that loud, sets up vibrations in your body that aren't always good for you."

They paused to catch their breath, and to let the cool sea breeze renew them. The music in the bar was still loud, but it seemed curiously distant, like a remembered dream.

"Well, where to?" she chirped.

"We could go back to my room, crack a bottle of wine, and have a nice private party," Joe said. "The air conditioning works fine. They have a pool, and it's only a short walk to the beach, if we decide we want to get wet."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho!" She put on the expression of a girl who is perfectly capable of choosing to do something she knows should not be done. "Well, what the hell? I'm game. I guess. Where are you staying?"

"The Sand Dollar. It's in Montezuma, a few miles down the road."

They walked to the far corner of the parking lot where his car, a late-model Celica in blazing red, was parked. Across the road, behind a

palisade of motels, specialty stores, and bait shops, the Atlantic Ocean pounded on the Jersey coast with waves that came all the way from Spain.

"By the way — " he was about to unlock the door and open it for her, but her words made him pause — "what's your name? There was so much noise in there, I didn't catch it."

She was being nice. He hadn't told her his name. He smiled at her and said, "Joe. Joe Verners. And come to think of it, I didn't catch yours, either."

She smiled back and said he could call her Linda. "Smith," she added, as the smile went the tiniest bit flat.

Joe spotted the wedding ring on her left hand and pretended he hadn't.

GOOD OLD BILL MCHALE. JOE LIKED A MAN WHO DIDN'T BEAR a grudge, and Bill McHale didn't bear a grudge. He had a wild sense of humor, really off the wall. Joe liked that, too.

Take the room, Bill said. "It has a kind of curse on it. That's why I'm letting you have it for free."

"What? What kind of curse? What're you talking about?"

"It's an old motel," Bill explained. "The same family owned it for years and years, until I bought 'em out. They told me about it. Sometime, it musta been thirty years ago, maybe, a guy killed himself in this room. Stood in front of the mirror and cut his throat with a straight razor."

Joe shuddered. The tendons in the backs of his knees felt chillingly vulnerable.

"Wait, that's not all," Bill went on. "Before he did that, the guy murdered his wife. Blood all over the place, or so I've heard; the room was like a slaughterhouse. There were screams, but people were afraid to go in there, and the cops came too late to do any good."

"Anyway, some guests have seen this guy in the mirror and gone positively bananas. So they tell me. I never seen nothin', myself."

Joe stared at him. Bill spread his palms and shrugged. "It's supposed to be true," he said. "Anyhow, it's the only room I got that's vacant. And I always wondered what a ghost would do if he ran into a tough sonofabitch like you."

Joe understood the joke by then and they both had a good laugh over it.

"You say you never seen this ghost, Bill?"

"Not me. Nobody's seen it since I took over here — or at least, nobody told me about seein' it. But the old owner swears it's all true. Still, if you're scared . . ."

Joe laughed again and made an obscene suggestion.

"Stop trying to scare me," he added. He didn't like to be scared.

THE GIRL WAS GOOD, AS GOOD AS JOE HAD HAD IN A LONG time. When they finally disentangled themselves from each other, he could have gone right to sleep and dreamed about her all night long. But he didn't.

Linda sat up in bed, pulled a sheet around her knees, and reached for a cigarette. She had set a pack on the night stand before taking off her clothes. The air conditioner was on full-blast and the room was chilly.

"So what do you do for a living, Joe?" she asked after lighting up.

Joe lazily turned his head on the pillow and gave her an insolent smile.

"I'm in insurance," he said.

"No, really."

"Insurance," he repeated. "You know. People pay you to take care of them in case something bad should happen to them." He wondered if Bill's sense of humor would be up to laughing at that definition.

"All right, be that way." Linda tried to sound as if she didn't care about not believing him. "I'm a teacher, myself. I came down here to spend a week with some friends."

Joe passed up an opportunity to score on her by making a crack about her wedding ring. He wouldn't mind seeing her again.

"I really am in insurance," he told her. "Matter of fact, the owner here is a friend of mine. If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't of been able to buy this motel." That was true, in its own way. "He lets me stay for free because he's grateful."

"Lucky man."

"I'll say. Bill can get sixty bucks a night for a room like this, or more. Well, maybe not this one . . ."

She gave him an odd look.

"What do you mean, 'not this one'?"

"Oh, nothing — forget it." Joe made a face and tried to dismiss the topic by waving his hand in the air. "Just a lot of bull, the guy was pulling my leg."

"Tell me," she insisted.

He told her.

"Oh, yick!" Linda shivered and tried to compress her body into a tight little ball. "What a story!"

"He made it all up," Joe said. "Bill's a big joker. He's got some weird ideas about what's funny."

"I don't know, I suppose it could be true. I had a great-aunt who used to be a maid at one of the big hotels in Philadelphia. She knew about a lot of gross things that happened there. Just like in *The Shining*."

"I don't know your aunt," Joe replied, "but I know Bill McHale, and he's a nut. But harmless. Let's change the subject."

He reached for her. She stubbed out the cigarette.

JOE FIGURED HE KNEW BILL MCHALE BETTER THAN ANYONE; at least, he knew a few things about him that nobody else knew. Bill didn't want anybody else to know them. To make sure, he had paid Joe a tidy sum over the years.

It was all Joe had needed to get started on a lucrative career of blackmail and extortion. Business burgeoned. He hadn't collected from Bill in years. Let bygones be bygones; hadn't he bailed Bill out two years ago, when it looked like he might be going under? That had wiped the slate clean, right? Bill had weathered his crisis, thanks to Joe, prospered, and finally attained his life-long dream of owning a motel on Long Beach Island. The hush money — it hadn't really been so much, all things considered — had turned out to be a good investment, the best investment Bill McHale had ever made.

Joe liked to think of it as a business relationship that had blossomed into friendship. It could happen, even in his line of work.

Yeah, Bill McHale was one hell of a guy. Not many men, given what had happened between them in the past, would have invited Joe Verners down to the shore to take a break from the heat wave that was suffocating Newark like a wool blanket saturated with kerosene.

Joe appreciated it.

HE WAS JUST STEPPING OUT OF THE BATHROOM WHEN LINDA let out a yelp and dropped her comb. She turned to him with fury in her eyes.

"Don't you ever do that again! Creeping up on me like that!"

"What's the matter with you? Are you nuts or something?" All women were, he thought.

"Maybe you think it's funny — " she was actually snarling — "but I don't have to put up with it, and I won't."

He took a step toward her, making a conciliatory gesture with his outstretched hand, but she backed off like a horse shying away from a snake.

"Hey, come on!" he pleaded. The stupid broad. "I didn't do anything. Honest. Look, I was just coming out of the bathroom. Didn't you see me standing there in the door?"

He kept his tone gentle and reasonable, and she calmed down a little. He went to the small refrigerator by the wall and poured her a glass of wine. She sat on the foot of the bed. When he brought her the wine, he sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. Her skin was cold and smooth, reminding him of silk sheets.

"You're trembling like a leaf," he observed.

"Well!" She took a long swallow of wine; the trembling subsided. "That horrible story about the guy with the razor must of got to me," she admitted. "I was combing my hair, and I thought I saw somebody behind me, in the mirror. Must of been my imagination. It couldn't of been you, could it? The bathroom's too far off to the side. Maybe it was just a trick of the light."

"Sure," he soothed her. He tried to keep a patronizing tone out of his voice, but didn't succeed. She must have noticed it because she pinched him, hard, on the leg.

"Ow!" He jumped to the floor and stood over her, rubbing the sore spot. "What'd you do that for?"

Ignoring the question, she finished the wine and held out her glass for a refill. Joe got it for her, thinking it was just his luck to get stuck with a dizzy one. And nobody pinched Joe Verners.

"Maybe," Linda suggested, "with the bathroom light shining behind you, it made a shadow or something on the wall over the bed, and the mirror picked it up."

"Sure," he grunted, sitting down again.

Maybe it wasn't too late to mend fences. He began to fondle her bare shoulder. Incredibly, he thought, the contact was arousing him again. She snuggled into him. They went back to bed for another go-round. Whoever said one-night stands were unsatisfying, he thought a few minutes later, was talking through his hat.

"Ugh!" she gasped. "I'm getting stiff. Could you turn down that air conditioner a little?"

"Okay." He got out of bed and went to the air conditioner, which

was located under the window that looked out on the patio and the pool. Cold air was billowing out like water bubbling up from an underground spring. He turned it way down. He heard the door snick shut as Linda retreated to the bathroom.

Come to think of it, he was a little stiff, too. He stretched, reaching for the ceiling, and idly parked himself on the foot of the bed, in front of the mirror.

The face that looked back at him was not his own.

THE ILLUSION VANISHED SO SUDDENLY THAT HE COULDN'T be sure he had actually experienced it. But he could feel his heart pounding against his ribs like a man buried alive beating on the lid of his coffin.

"Joe?"

He startled. She was staring at him.

"What's the matter? You're as white as a sheet."

"Nothing, nothing!" He spoke hurriedly, almost stammering. But he wasn't going to open that can of worms again. "I got a chill, that's all. You were right about it being too cold in here."

The way she smiled at him would have curdled milk.

"You were looking at the mirror," she said accusingly. "you saw something, just like I did. You're as scared as I was."

The triumph in her voice grated on him like steel wool. She made it sound as if his getting scared were some kind of great achievement for her.

"Don't tell me I saw something when I didn't."

"Can't admit it, can you?" she teased.

The color came back to his face, a red flood pumped by anger. Admit what? He supposed she was one of those women's libbers who wanted men to break into tears whenever something went wrong.

"If there's one thing I hate," he said slowly, "it's a smart broad."

"It's better than some dumb clod," she countered, "who's too busy playing Mr. Macho to face up to the truth."

"Truth? What truth?" The harder she pushed him, the more he became convinced that he had seen absolutely nothing unusual in the mirror. "Hey, just because you're scared of shadows, doesn't mean I am."

That hit her where it hurt. Red spots stood out on her creamy cheeks.

"Listen to the big, strong man!" she sneered. "Let's himself get scared by a silly ghost story! Tries to pretend he didn't. Let's hear it for

the tough guy!"

Fists clenched at his sides, he leaped up from the bed. All over his body, his muscles were jumping into knots. She started back a step, then recovered.

"Now he wants to show how tough he is," she taunted. "Well, blow it out your ear, mister! I'm leaving."

She tried to get around him, but he grabbed her arm and spun her back. Suddenly she wasn't beautiful anymore. He didn't know what to call her. He was too mad to think of a word.

"You're hurting me!" she growled, jerking futilely in his grip. Her arm was turning white where he was holding it.

"A lot of people," he told her, "have been sorry they mouthed off at me. A lot of people!"

She spat in his face. He slapped her, hard. She came back at him with fingers hooked into talons, going for his eyes. She missed and raked him painfully across the cheek. He felt his mind dissolve into rage. It ate him up like a fire in an attic.

When he could think again, he found himself bent over her, panting, his big hands clenched around her white throat. There was blood in her mouth.

"Oh, Christ!" he muttered.

His hands turned into water and he lost her. She fell backward onto the bed and sprawled like a broken doll. He tried to put his hands over his eyes, but his arms hung limply in front of him, useless. The wine in his stomach wound up on the rug. He sat down beside her and sobbed for breath.

A hundred years elapsed, or so it seemed. He looked at her again and tried to plan his next move. He was in deep, this time. What had come over him?

Bill McHale would fix it for him. Good old Bill, He'd have to. Bill owed him plenty.

He lifted his head and glanced at the mirror.

Another man was there, bending over another woman.

Joe Verners growled, almost howled. Blindly, he spun off the bed, grabbed the bottle of wine from the top of the refrigerator, and hurled it at the mirror. He missed. The bottle shattered against the wall, an explosion of glass. Red wine dripped and oozed everywhere, like blood.

The rage drained out of him, leaving him numb. When he stepped on a piece of glass and cut his bare foot, he felt nothing. He stood in



front of the mirror.

The strange man's eyes bored into him like stars in the sky of hell. The man was holding a straight razor. Joe shook his head, reached out to clean up some of the mess, and came up with the broken neck of the wine bottle.

The man raised the blade to his throat. Joe raised the curved sliver of glass.

#### THE DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT WAS SYMPATHETIC.

"It's a terrible thing, Mr. McHale," he clucked, "a terrible thing. And him being a friend of yours and all."

Bill McHale shook his head sadly, shrugged his pudgy shoulders, and had another swallow of beer. He couldn't taste it, but it was cold. He put the can down and rested his elbows on his desk, his chin in his hands.

"I just feel awful," he said, "about that girl and her husband. Too bad about Joe, but he'd been under a lot of pressure lately. That's why I asked him down here. I had no idea he was that close to a breakdown."

"If we'd only gotten here a little sooner," said the detective. "Man, what a way to go!"

"I'll never forget it," McHale shuddered.

"It's bound to be in all the papers," the detective went on, "more's the pity. Might cost you some business. Murder and suicide give a place a bad name."

"Can't be helped," McHale sighed philosophically. "Anyway, the season's almost over. It'll be forgotten next year."

"Yeah," agreed the detective. "people on the island won't forget, though. Thank God for bennies. The tourists who come here next season won't know a thing about it."

"Right."

The detective got up to leave, but something made him pause at the door of McHale's office.

"By the way," he said, "didn't something like this happen here once before, a long time ago?"

"Oh, good heavens, no!" McHale summoned up a wan laugh. "Things have always been quiet at the old Sand Dollar. You could look it up."

"No thanks," said the detective, "I don't imagine I will."

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*They just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time — and so they became heroes, among other things!*

# It Could Happen To Anybody

by W. Glenn Duncan

IT WAS JUST A SMALL BANK. FLO AND I WERE WORKING together again and we'd been getting along pretty well. Then I saw a man with a shotgun inside the bank and I knew Flo would be on my case again. Damn! Nag, nag, nag.

The guy was imposing, all dressed up in his bank robbing clothes, and the bank employees and customers he had cornered must have felt it, too. An old man — he looked like the bank president — splut-

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tered and blustered, though I saw he kept his hands up. Way up. A woman about fifty-five, with a prune face, kept opening and closing her small round mouth without making a sound. She looked like a fish in an aquarium where the oxygen level was way, way down.

Flo and I didn't have a chance to see much more before the bank door closed behind us. Sharp clicks sounded when the lock was thrown. Then we heard the voice.

"Get over there with the rest of them. Now! Move it, move it!"

The man behind us sounded excited, so we moved it, moved it. When he herded us into the group of captives, Flo started in on me. "And just what have you landed us in this time, Max?" Bitter, icy tone.

"Well, Flo honey, I'm not real sure, but it looks like these gentlemen are robbing this bank."

"I can see that!" She used the brittle tone I associated with her being angry. Personally, I prefer her screaming and raving. Then, she's only a little upset.

"Shut up, lady! If I want talkin', I'll do it myself." The beefy man with the shotgun managed to quiet Flo down and it suited me. I'd hear about my lousy luck later. Now I wanted an uninterrupted look at the two guys with guns.

Shotgun was heavy, with big shoulders and scarred, thick-fingered hands. He held a pump-action shotgun, probably twelve gauge, and he kept panning it back and forth.

Shotgun's partner was thin — scrawny, actually — and I had the impression he was young. Twentyish, maybe. He had the tense, nervous mannerisms of a hungry junkie. He bobbed and ducked, shifted his weight jerkily. He carried a Colt .45 automatic, one of the old military models. The massive hand-cannon was too big for his small hand.

Both men wore baggy brown coveralls and ski-masks.

I CHECKED OUR SMALL BAND OF VICTIMS, TRYING TO GET everybody sorted out. The bank president had quit yammering and he stood quietly. The middle-aged woman continued her fish imitation. A lean, athletic-looking man in a muted gray suit similar to mine looked like a bank man, maybe a loan officer. Two young girls were probably tellers.

There was an elderly couple, too, but I put them down as customers. They were holding hands and they both looked terrified. The old

woman was a tiny thing, not more than five feet tall, and she had that dried parchment skin some people acquire with age and sun. She held her bank book in her free hand and the poor old dear was trembling so badly the bright red book flapped and slapped open and shut.

Flo kept her voice down but she couldn't stay off my back. "Max Borkus, of all the dumb stunts you've ever pulled, this is the utter pits! Why the hell did we have to come here now?"

"Flo, come on! How could I know the bank was going to be robbed as we walked in the door? It's not my fault. It could happen to anybody."

"That's what you always say, Max. But it doesn't happen to just anybody. Stupid things like this only happen to you. And me, because I'm dumb enough to be with you."

Flo sighed. It was a real heart-breaker. Flo can sigh like nobody you ever heard before. When she puts her mind to it, she sounds like the lost souls of all the martyrs in history in concert.

"Flo, this is serious! Knock it off!"

She stopped and looked up at nothing, her lips pursed and her back stiff with disapproval. I saw a woman on a bus do the same thing once, after a nearby drunk vomited into his hat.

Shotgun muttered something to the kid, who nodded shakily and turned toward the tellers' cages. I wondered why it had taken them so long to get around to picking up the money. The little bank had a parking lot in front so passers-by couldn't see inside easily. Even so, more customers could always arrive at any time. Shotgun and The Kid were amateurs, I decided, and then I got a little worried.

Amateurs with guns retain all their television illusions. The idiots think all they have to do is point the big guns and every one will do what they say. And if they don't, one easy shot sends them slumping gracefully to the floor. Without bleeding.

Like I say, amateurs scare me.

THE TWO TURKEYS ROBBING THE BANK WEREN'T THE ONLY ones who watched too much TV. The loan officer was suffering from an overdose, too. He made a jump for The Kid. I suppose he expected to grab the Colt or something equally stupid and heroic, but he didn't even get close. The Kid sidestepped and thumped him on the head with the barrel of the heavy automatic. Boy-hero dropped in a heap. The Kid stood over him and aimed the Colt at the back of his head, as if daring him to move.

One of the girl tellers screamed and buried her face in her hands. The other one rolled her eyes up into her head and fainted. She dropped like a sackful of rocks.

I suppose it was my irritation at the screw-up and Flo's bitching that made me think I was a hero, too. While Shotgun's attention was diverted, I eased toward him. That smart idea went straight to the top of my things-not-to-do-list when he spotted me, turned and pointed the gun at my face.

A shotgun barrel is not very big, really. Unless it's attached to an angry man and pointed at your eyes from twelve inches away. Then, a twelve gauge shotgun barrel is big enough to walk through upright.

I raised my hands again and backed off, saying, in what I hoped were soothing tones, "Easy. No problem, buddy."

The shotgun barrel dropped and I started to relax. Then he slammed the end of the barrel about six inches into my stomach. It knocked the wind out of me with a *whoosh* and I fell.

When I could breathe again without feeling knives, I looked up. The Kid was jumpier than ever, twitching and hopping and jabbering a macho blue streak. He pointed at the fallen bank worker. "Didja see me, Al? Boy, did I clobber him. We're tigers, Al, tigers! Nobody messes with me or . . ." Plus a lot more of the same. The Kid was psyching himself way, way up. The next person would catch a faceful of .45 slug, not just a clout on the skull.

And, of course, Flo couldn't leave it alone. She tore into me again. "Max, you are the most useless man I've ever seen. What sort of stupid move was that? These guys will shoot as soon as look at you!"

"Will you shut up, woman?"

I managed to stand but not very straight. I hugged my sore stomach with both hands and stayed bent over partway. It helped some.

Shotgun Al watched Flo and I argue. Through the holes in his ski-mask, I saw his eyes widen. Apparently, he couldn't understand Flo. I knew how he felt.

Al ordered her back with the group but Flo stood her ground.

"With that clown? No way!" She planted her feet and lifted her chin, folded her arms around her purse. "Look, buster. You just get on with your dumb bank robbery and don't mind me. I'm not as stupid as him," she said scornfully, jerking her thumb at me. "I'm not going to mess with a man with a great big gun. Go on, now." Sudden afterthought. "And hurry it up. I've got things to do today."

Al shook his head slowly. He seemed to remember where he was and

called to The Kid. "Will you get the money, for God's sake? And stop waving that gun around!" Al sounded peeved, like things weren't going the way he'd planned.

"Okay, Al. Coming up!" The Kid ducked into the first teller's cage and started rifling the cash drawers.

Flo started to chip Al. "You know, you could have picked some other bank to rob. Do you have any idea what an inconvenience this is?"

AL HAD TROUBLE KEEPING ALL OF US COVERED. HE SWEEPED the shotgun muzzle through an arc of sixty degrees or more, from Flo to the rest of us and back to Flo. He tried to back away from her but, every time he moved, she moved with him. And with each step, Flo moved sideways a little bit. She slowly opened the gap between herself and the rest of us. She pestered Al continuously and it seemed to be getting on his nerves. Once, when she called his shotgun a rifle, he corrected her before he stopped to think.

"Oh, so it's a shotgun, is it?" she said. "Well, what's a rifle, then? It's one of those long things, too, isn't it? Anyway, I don't care. Shotgun, rifle, whatever, it's very rude for you to point it like that."

The Kid had cleaned out the cash in the first cage. He was starting on the second one when Flo slipped me a quick wink, then bored in on Al again. She started a rambling lecture about loaded guns and pointed to the safety slide on the shotgun.

"Is that little bitty thing the safety gizmo? It's awfully small. Is that really safe enough? And why is it there, pushed toward the back? Does that mean it's ready to shoot?"

If the safety *had* been pushed toward the butt, the shotgun wouldn't fire and Al was so flustered he lifted the gun to look. As soon as the barrel was pointed at the ceiling, Flo moved. She nailed him with a knee to the groin that lifted the legs of his loose coveralls halfway up his shins.

After that, I didn't see much of Flo's side of the action because I was headed for The Kid. He had been stuffing handfuls of cash into his pockets but when he heard Al shriek, he whipped around, Colt first. When I got to him, he had the automatic raised and he pointed it at me in a lop-sided, stiff-armed stance. He looked ready to shoot, so I stuck my hand out and caught the muzzle in my palm. And I pushed hard. I saw The Kid's eyes framed by the holes in his ski-mask. He was very surprised that his big iron toy wouldn't go bang.

I thought everybody knew about the three safeties on the old Colts,

but The Kid apparently didn't. When I pressed the slide back on the slop all those mass-produced military pieces have, he couldn't shoot. The Kid kept trying, squeezing the trigger hard, but I kept the pressure on the barrel and twisted the pistol. The twist opened the grip safety.

As soon as the Colt was loose in The Kid's hand, it was only scrap iron. I kept bending it until I heard his trigger finger pop and felt the gun go loose. Then I gave him a jab in the solar plexus that took the fight out of him. He sank to the floor of the teller's cage. Loose bills fluttered after him.

I had the Colt in my fist when I came out of the cage but Flo didn't need any help. She had Al spreadeagled on the floor. She kept clear of his feet and hands and aimed the shotgun at the small of his back. He tried to raise his hips. I think he only wanted to ease the pain in his crotch, not get up, but his motives didn't matter to Flo. She spiked him in the ribs with a high heel. He groaned and flopped flat.

THE BANK PRESIDENT WAS BENDING OVER THE GIRL WHO had fainted, patting her cheeks. The loan officer was coming around, sitting up, holding his head and cursing.

I looked at Flo. "How ya doing, babe?"

"No problems here. Shall we?"

"We shall indeed, my pet."

Just then, the old bag sang out. I couldn't find her at first, then I spotted her in a partitioned area along one wall. On the glass room-divider, austere gold leaf said: B.F. DAVIDSON, PRESIDENT.

"Mr. Davidson," the woman screeched. "I pushed the alarm button and I have the police on the phone now." I saw her talk into the phone. I had to give the old girl credit. Once she came out of fish mode, she moved fast.

Flo looked at me, shrugged and said, "Everything is under control now, Sergeant Borkus. I suppose we'd better move along." She used one hand to help the loan officer to his feet, handed him the shotgun and showed him where to stand while he guarded Al. From the way the bank guy kept licking his lips, I think he would have been happy for an excuse to blow Al's spine in half.

Davidson left the unconscious teller and hustled up to me. "Sergeant? Did she say 'Sergeant'? We fooled them, didn't we? Here, take this." I handed him the Colt and pointed to The Kid. Davidson held the large oily pistol between two fingers like it was something nasty he'd

found on the sidewalk.

"Are you ready, sergeant?" Flo prompted. We started for the door. A key was in the inside lock and I used it, but before I could pull the door open, Davidson was in my way.

"But, sergeant, you can't leave now! I want to tell your superiors what a splendid job you did."

"Thanks. You tell 'em about it and I'll see them at the station house. Alright?" I pushed past him. He followed me outside, clutching at my arm with one hand while the Colt dangled from the other.

Flo slipped past us and waved to a car in the far corner of the bank parking lot. Tires squawled as it accelerated toward us.

"Look, pal," I said to Davidson. "The first prowler car will be here soon. If they see you with that gun, they're gonna think you're one of the holdup men."

He looked blank for a moment, then squealed and ran inside.

OUR CAR SMOKED TO A STOP AND FLO HOPPED IN THE BACK. Davey leaned across the front seat and threw open the door for me. Warily, I slid in. Before I could close the door, Davey rolled. We hit the street, turned right and ran a red light at the corner.

"Slow down," Flo snapped. "There's no hurry."

"What the hell *happened* in there? You were gone a long time."

"Oh, it was one of Max's typical screw-ups." Flo was back at it. "I swear I don't know why I keep working with you, *Sergeant Borkus*."

"Sergeant?" Davey goggled at me.

"Flo told 'em we were cops."

"Why?"

"Somebody had to do something," Flo said from the back.

"Lay off, Flo. It could happen to . . ."

"If you say 'it could happen to anybody' again, I'll scream. I mean it, Max."

"Okay, okay."

Davey looked puzzled but he knows not to push when Flo's in one of her moods. So he just asked, "Where do you want to go now?"

My gun, jammed in the back of my belt under my coat, was poking me in the back. I took it out, checked it, then tucked it under my leg. I heard Flo snap open her purse and spin the cylinder of her revolver.

"Oh, what the hell, let's try that bank branch on Western. Maybe this time we'll get there before somebody else robs it first." ●



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*The Master made the rules quite clear: evil must be eradicated, regardless of who had to pay the price!*

# Enlightenment

by GARY ALEXANDER

A VITAL STEP TOWARD EXPERIENCING TRUTH AND PURE enlightenment, says Master, is the understanding of evil. Master teaches that evil is of two forms: inconsequential and heinous. You must ignore the former, eradicate the latter. No middle ground.

Inconsequential evil, says Master, is the sort we encounter day to day in airports and other public places as we sell flowers and copies of Master's book. This is small, bitter, ignorant evil, says Master; pitiful expressions of venom from those who deny themselves the opportunity to experience truth and pure enlightenment. It pains *him* when we are abused in his behalf, says Master. But we must endure, must not confront these small people. If we become involved in commotions, Master warns, the authorities may forbid us from guiding others to the path of truth and pure enlightenment. This would be a heinous evil, a sin against mankind.

Master says we must expect persecution of him through us. All great prophets were persecuted. Buddha. Christ. Gandhi. We are proud to be Master's surrogates.

MASTER SPOKE TO US THE OTHER NIGHT. IT WAS A WONDERFUL surprise. We were notified at dinner, hurried through our meal, went downstairs, joined hands, listened and watched.

Master spoke to us on videotape. I have never met Master. Neither have most of my brothers and sisters. Master is teaching truth and

pure enlightenment throughout the world, so Master has little time to visit us all. Still, we hope.

Master spoke of heinous evil. He spoke of inflation and high interest rates and of the conspiracies to thwart his work. Unfortunately, we must fight heinous evil with its own weapon: money. We must eradicate heinous evil with mammon.

To further our goals Master purchased a large farm in the next state. We would produce food to feed the peoples of the world. We would produce revenue that would be used to spread the teachings of truth and pure enlightenment. In the morning, my brothers and sisters would be asked to volunteer to work on the farm.

Master ended by reminding us of the most heinous evil: misguided parents and false friends. Blinded by ignorance and hatred, they have been relentless in their efforts to draw us away from truth and pure enlightenment. Be ever vigilant, Master said. Be especially wary of those known as deprogrammers, Master said. They are instruments of Satan.

We went upstairs in a joyous mood. I knew *all* of my brothers and sisters would volunteer. We would not all be chosen, I knew. We sold Master's books and flowers, worked regular jobs and day labor; *mammon* would have to come from many sources.

We heard yelling outside, on the sidewalk in front of the mansion. I looked through a window and saw the brothers Master had designated to deal with these situations. They were tall and husky. They were talking to some people who stood by a car. The police were there also. Eventually the people got into their car and left. *Instruments of Satan?*

It was dark, but the people looked slightly familiar. The woman in particular. The gray hair, the glasses. My former life. Mother? I stayed at the window longer than my brothers and sisters, just staring out.

WE ARRIVED JUST IN TIME FOR SPRING PLANTING. MOST OF us worked the fields. The others renovated the stately farm house. It would be big enough to house us all, but until the work was underway, we lived in tents.

The labor required was hard yet exhilarating. Twelve hour days summoning life from the soil. Rolling hills formed the horizon. The land was fertile, the climate friendly. We were isolated from hatred and evil, free to do Master's work.

Then, near harvest, Master visited us in person. We were in the

fields, hoeing weeds between the rows of tomatoes when the helicopter fluttered down by the house. We knew. We just *knew*. We dropped our tools and ran. It was autumn and ominous clouds had been building beyond the rolling hills; the wind was stirring. By the time we reached Master, it had begun to drizzle.

We joined hands and Master spoke. He spoke briefly. He told us that our efforts would do much to spread the word of truth and pure enlightenment. Master was a tall man. His elegant gray suit matched his hair. There was an aura about him I could not possibly describe.

The rain intensified, pelted Master. I felt nothing. Master went inside the house. We returned to our work, hoping to get a little more done before the soil turned into muck.

We heard voices of anger at the gate. Those people, those same people in that same car were there, arguing with our brothers who guarded the gate. The people were screaming. Other brothers ran out to assist. These brothers were larger and huskier than those who lived and worked on the farm. They were older too. These brothers had arrived with Master on the helicopter. They also wore nice suits.

I could not see well because of the weather and the distance. I could, however, see a scuffle. I don't know who pushed who first, but the old woman fell against the side of the car. She hung on to a door handle to keep from falling. There was a spot of red on her face; red stood out against the backdrop of gray.

The man, also old, moved. With the motions of blind fury. But thirty or forty or fifty years too late for the necessary quickness and power. He went down, slumping into a heap. A brother's leg moved, then the other.

We watched and listened, absorbing the silence and lack of movement. One of the brothers scratched his head, another shrugged his shoulders. Then they helped the old couple into their car. They drove off.

I shifted my attention to my brothers and sisters nearby. They were leaning against their tools. They had been observing with curiosity, without emotion. The car vanished into the haze. They resumed work.

**MASTER STAYED OVERNIGHT. I OVERHEARD SOMEONE SAY** that the airfield was socked in. Even if they could fly back to it in the helicopter, there were no flights headed out. Master and his Lear Jet were grounded.

We were exuberant and only mildly disappointed when it was

announced that Master would not be joining us for dinner. I and other acolytes slept on the third floor, but tonight we would have to roll out sleeping bags in the living room. Master needed it to work and to meditate. There were many crises for him to deal with. He needed the time and the privacy. One of my sisters took a tray up to him.

We understood.

**LATE, VERY LATE; I COULD NOT SLEEP. I TIPTOED UP THE stairwell. I had questions, disturbing questions.**

I awakened no one, was not challenged. The brothers who had accompanied Master were patrolling the gate and the fences. They were concerned about the earlier incident. They had borrowed slickers and flashlights. I had noticed a leather shoulder strap under the suit coat of one of the brothers. I hoped that those old people or their instruments of Satan would not return to cause more trouble.

The door to Master's room was unlocked. I walked in and smelled something unfamiliar in the air: the stale fumes of whiskey. Evidently, the sister was a light sleeper. She sat upright, screamed, covered herself, and ran out of the room.

Master awoke. It was warm up here and he wasn't totally covered. I switched on a light. He blinked and covered his eyes.

Why, Master?

Why what? The words were barely unintelligible. Master was bleary, flabby, disoriented. Drunk, I think.

My Mom and my Dad, I said. They didn't mean any harm, I didn't think. They would never attain truth and pure enlightenment, I said. They were elderly, set in their ways. But was that any reason to hurt them? I didn't believe they were evil, either inconsequentially or heinously. How come?

Master smirked. Then he yawned. He muttered something I couldn't quite make out. I think it was an obscenity. Directed to me or my folks? I couldn't tell. If it was, it was wrong. Master taught us that profanity was wrong.

He really must have been drunk. He didn't seem to notice the hoe. Master had forbidden us to use alcohol.

I doubt if he suffered. For that I was happy. I made sure. I swung the hoe enough times so he wouldn't.

I sat on the floor and waited.

Evil, Master taught us, must either be ignored or eradicated. ●

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*There were lots of ways a person could cut corners — if he  
were inventive enough!*

# Beating the High Cost of Living

by RON BROWN

ERNEST REED OPENED THE CAN OF TOMATO SOUP AND placed it on his hot plate. It will make a nice paste, he thought. I might add just a little cheese for flavor. It would be a good lunch. The box marked GOVERNMENT SURPLUS sat alone on the small refrigerator shelf. Pickings had been slim for him for some time, but he always managed. He unwrapped the meat there and brought a patty to his nose. Not too old. Well, maybe just a bit too long in the cold, but it would do. A little butter, salt, and seasoning would fry it up just fine, thank you.

He did not mind eating cat. In fact, since the time two years ago when he had gotten drunk on the good stuff and spent his social security check on his two day binge, only to have no money left over for groceries, he had developed a taste for the meat. Freddie never knew quite what hit him, and fried up just right, he was quite tasty. Ernest Reed ate cats. About one a day, and the neighborhood was a better place for it.

There were a lot of strays in this part of town. He viewed his gourmet taste as a combination of survival and pest control. Freddie had been the only cat he ever liked. And drunk, he hadn't recalled much about Freddie's demise. The skin and fur pulled down easy from the head. Like squirrel almost. He was becoming a real connoisseur.

Ernest was quite careful about his selection of meals. No old Tom graced his table. Too old, he'd ignore them. Fight worn and snarled, too tough. A nice female on the prowl was just right. The neighborhood was none the wiser and less bothered by the pests anyway. It was like a public service. Ernest Reed. Tenements' answer to the leash law.

HE WAS ACTUALLY BECOMING A REAL PUBLIC SERVANT. A few months back, he had made a deal with the humane society to help find a home for one stray a month. That had saved him a lot of time and effort. It eased the labor of the society's workers, and it brought meat to his table. These cats were a better breed as well, coming from secure homes, often well fed, and unusually tender. You're a real entrepreneur, he thought. It had become an obsession almost for him. Following them had lead him to a real appreciation for the species. He carefully watched their maneuvers, would often scout out future prey for days before striking, and at times would even try to anticipate their moves.

He had noticed lately a real influx of rats to his tenement dwelling. And why not? He was killing off the killers; the enemy was spreading again. He found himself spending more and more time on all fours investigating their homes. He was at first disgusted by the sight of them, but he soon became aware that here was another potential food source. This thought did not perplex him in the least, and strangely, he felt a growing attraction to the rats. He thought often of their taste and even captured one before changing his mind and disposing of it in the alley.

Birds were occupying much of his thoughts these days as well. He would sit for hours and watch them perch on his clothes line. Pigeons mostly. Their cooing was soothing, and he thought one might go nicely next to his cat with tomato sauce. He could feel these desires growing stronger daily. Cats. Rats. Birds. Simple, really, he thought. It's all so simple. No need to hustle and worry and fret. It's all here. I just have to pursue it. You are the master of your own fate, Ernest. Don't let poverty be your drawback. Assert yourself. Take charge.

He ate his first rat a week later. A pigeon soon followed, though he did look a little ridiculous jumping up at his clothes line from the fire escape. The bird was a nice change in diet.

And what fun he had that night chasing that old ball of yarn around the bedroom . . . .



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*It wasn't anything personal; it was just that she had a secret.*

# The Bracelet

by HENRY SLESAR

NO PERFUME CAN MAKE A WOMAN AS INTRIGUING AS ONE broken dinner date. Ken Bolster was prepared for that maneuver when he met Sandy Whitten in the laundry room of the Montmorency, a cluster of studio apartments obviously designed for turning singles into couples. Over a period of five weeks, Ken took Sandy to six movies, one musical, one ball game, and eleven dinners. Then, as suddenly as if they had quarreled — which they hadn't — Sandy stopped seeing him.

If it was a ploy, it was a baffling one. Sandy, an engaging redhead with a sweet smile, smiled as sweetly as ever when they met. She offered no explanations, beyond "being busy." Feeling hurt, bewildered, even betrayed, Ken dated a neighbor named Shelley, who was delighted to confirm his desirability. He was not only pleasant of aspect, he was also, at thirty-one years of age, the branch manager of a large retail chain, the youngest to hold such a position in the conservative company. He was the most eligible bachelor in the complex, and Sandy Whitten had dropped him. Why? Shelley, snuggling up close in Ken's red two-seater, offered the opinion that he was well rid of her, that she was one hard little cookie, not



worth the trouble of pursuit.

Her remark only made Ken resolute. That night, he knocked on Sandy's door and slammed it behind him the moment he was inside.

"All right," he said, with a Bogart grimace. "Let's talk. What's going on? Why won't you see me any more? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," Sandy said. "Believe me, Ken, nothing at all."

"I can't believe that. We saw each other four times the week before last, five times last week . . . We were getting so close . . ." He winced. "Or was that it? Was I getting too close for comfort? You know I like you, Sandy, maybe I'm even —"

"Stop," Sandy said, holding up her hand, a pretty, redheaded traffic cop. "Don't say any more or I'll start crying. You don't want to see me cry, Ken, I look awful with wet makeup . . . I like you, too, but I can't see you any more. And there's a reason, but I just can't tell you what it is."

But his arms were around her by then, and he was pressing her to him, murmuring plaintive words, kissing the salty moisture on her cheek and totally destroying her own resolve.

"I like you," she told him again, when they were on the loveseat, "and that's why I decided to stop seeing you. Because you're so much better than I am, Ken, so much better a person."

He gave her a look that implied something she didn't mean.

"No, no," she said quickly. "It's not what you're thinking. It has nothing to do with my own love life. It's me, it's my character, it's what I did, Ken. What I am." She closed her eyes. "*I'm a thief*," she said.

The words weakened his hold on her. She rose from the loveseat and moved to the opposite chair, putting her face in the shadows when she told him the story.

"IT HAPPENED A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO. I WAS STILL IN school, trying to learn a trade. I was sharing an apartment with a friend of mine named Heather who was already working, even if she didn't really need to work. Heather's family had money. Heather was the kind of girl who'd drag her mink across the floor when she came in. She was careless about her things, she put no value on them. I was different. My family was poor. I still caught my breath whenever I saw expensive, shiny things. And I never saw anything in my life as shiny and desirable as Heather's bracelet."

"I don't know how to describe my feelings about that bracelet. I was never much of a jewelry person. But that smooth silvery bracelet was

like the epitome of everything I ever wanted in my life . . .”

“But it wasn’t mine. It was Heather’s. She never knew how much I treasured it. I never mentioned the bracelet to her, although there were times when I would pick it up and fondle it absently, the way you might examine a spoon at the dinner table.”

“Then one day, Heather, who was always misplacing things, misplaced the bracelet.”

“She was as casual in her search as she was about its possession. I helped her, of course. When neither one of us could find it, Heather shrugged and voiced her confidence that it would ‘turn up.’ She was right. It did turn up. That evening, when Heather was out, the bracelet winked at me from inside the carpet slipper where it had fallen. I shook it out, and slipped it on my own wrist, and began to tremble with the thought of how easy it would be to permit the bracelet to remain ‘misplaced’ forever.”

She paused, and Ken waited to see if it was a full stop.

“And that’s all?” he said.

“Isn’t it enough?”

“You mean you stopped seeing me because of a bracelet you stole from a friend — a year ago?”

“Don’t you understand?” Sandy said. “I didn’t feel remorse. I didn’t make amends. I didn’t return what I stole. To this moment, I can’t bring myself to change the thing I did. I’m a thief, Ken, and I can’t get mixed up with honest people . . . Now would you please go, so I can cry without being watched? So I can start forgetting I ever knew you?”

“And you think I should do the same?” He stood up and took her arms just above the elbows. “You think I’m going to walk out on you, because of this ‘unholier than thou’ story? Well, it’s your turn to sit down, honey.”

“What?”

“Sit,” he said firmly, like a dog trainer, and plunked her on the love-seat again. “Sit and listen, and maybe you’ll stop feeling so smug about your ‘bad character.’ ”

“I TOLD YOU ABOUT MY JOB,” KEN SAID. “I TOLD YOU THAT I’m the youngest branch manager in the company, the youngest they’ve ever had, and the company is a hundred years old. It’s one of those places that believes in ‘seniority.’ Well, my boss was senior, all right. He was thirty years older than me, and he used to boast that he

could beat me at anything. He could outtalk me, outwalk me, outjog me, outsquash me, and what he especially wanted to do was outlive me, because then he would have been my boss forever unless I quit the company. And I didn't want to do that, Sandy. I'd put nine years into that company, they had their hooks into me with their profit-sharing trusts and pension plans and all that . . . But I also didn't want to wait another ten or twenty years to run my own show . . ."

"The worst thing about old Boothroyd, my boss, was that what he boasted about was true. I mean he was sixty, small and squat, with a shaved head and a neck like Samson. He had all his teeth, he could lift his desk off the floor. And he ran that store like a clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the sales ran up, the costs went down. Year after year, there were commendations from the home office. Once, at an award dinner, Boothroyd mentioned me in his acceptance speech. He called me 'Kenneth.' He never even mentioned my last name. When I was introduced to The Boss, he shook my hand and called me 'Mr. Kenneth,' and told me how lucky I was to work for a man like Mr. Boothroyd.

"But everyone has a weakness, right? I learned about Boothroyd's from somebody who worked for him. Well, not just somebody, his secretary. I was dating her. She told me where Mr. Boothroyd went every Tuesday night.

"No, not that. AA meetings. Boothroyd was an alcoholic. The last time he had fallen off the wagon was about ten years ago, just before I was hired. He was given another chance, and never fell again. So there was at least one thing Boothroyd couldn't do better than me. He couldn't outdrink me.

"But last year, things turned around. Well, you know what happened to department store sales last year. The branch still ran like a clock, tick-tock. But this time, the sales went down and the costs ran up. There was nothing Boothroyd could do to stop it. All his skill and experience didn't help. The local unemployment in our area was so high, people just stopped buying. Our branch slipped from the Top Five on the company chart to the Bottom Five. And old Boothroyd began to think he was slipping, too.

"Whenever he had a problem, Boothroyd took to the water.

"He had a boat, a little sloop he liked to take out on the Bay on weekends. He had asked me out a dozen times, but I was no sailor. But when he asked me again, practically ordered me, I accepted. I brought the cheese, the cold cuts, and the booze.

"No, don't look at me that way. I didn't bring whiskey because I remembered Boothroyd's problem; I was thinking of my own. Six hours on the water with a gloomridden branch manager. I wanted some kind of fortification. What I didn't realize was: Boothroyd was in need of the same thing.

"The first thing that went wrong was the weather. A light wind blew out the sail and we skimmed easily towards the horizon. Soon we were out of sight of land, which made me uneasy, so I had my first drink. I saw a look of surprise on Boothroyd's face as he heard the clink of bottle and glass. He didn't know I had brought liquor aboard. He said nothing. He just went to his instruments and began muttering over them. He seemed to know a problem was ahead, and he was right. The wind died. The sky turned milky orange, and the sloop sloshed quietly in the odd-colored waves. Boothroyd did something to the sails, and then he sat down and told me we had to be patient.

"Personally, I liked the quiet, but it made Boothroyd want to talk. He talked and talked. He told me all his problems, not just about the store, and the company, and this clerk and that buyer, but about the wife who divorced him, the daughter he doted on, the son who deserted him. And all the time, he watched my bottle tipping into my glass. Until, at last, I simply handed it to him. He never said 'yes,' or 'no,' or 'thank you.' He just took the glass and filled it.

"When the wind finally returned, I knew I had made a mistake. A drunken skipper is a fearful thing. The way Boothroyd stumbled and cursed and floundered on that deck was a sight to behold, an unnerving sight for a landlubber like me. And then, just as Boothroyd had unlashd the mainsail, a sudden gust of wind swung the boom against him, and Boothroyd was in the water.

"I wish I could say I was drunk, too, but I wasn't. The sight of Boothroyd splashing in the Bay sobered me at once. I looked at his head bobbing in the waves, the drops spraying from his bald head, and I heard him shout at me to throw him a line or a life preserver or whatever it was he shouted. The wind didn't make him inaudible; I just didn't want to hear him. And I also knew that . . . I didn't want him back in the boat . . ."

SANDY STOOD UP. THE ROOM HAD GROWN DARK, AND SHE switched on a table lamp.

"He drowned, didn't he?" she said.

"Yes," Ken nodded miserably. "That's how I got the promotion.

And . . . that makes me a kind of thief, too, doesn't it? Only what I stole was a job."

"A life," she corrected.

Ken sighed. "All right. A life. That was even worse. Worse than what you did, Sandy. I could have saved him. But I didn't. Now you tell me which one of us is the better person?"

"He was," Sandy said. "Poor Mr. Boothroyd. Heather thought her father was one of the finest men she ever knew."

"Heather?" Ken said blankly. "You mean your roommate Heather?" He saw her opening her purse. She removed her wallet and opened it. He saw her photograph, not a flattering one, and a chunk of metal.

"I'm sorry, Ken," she said. "I'm a police officer. But one thing I told you is absolutely true. I really did want this bracelet." She lifted the handcuffs out of her purse.

●

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*His brains were mashed, along with his mentality. Big Jim kept him around just for laughs — and as an example to anybody else that tried to cross him!*

# Dummy

by R. TUTTLE

BIG JIM DELANY HAD COME UP THROUGH THE RANKS FROM A mere stock boy in a chemical company to one of the head men in a huge, nationwide drug smuggling syndicate. He stood six feet two, had a full head of graying black hair and had gained about fifty pounds since his stock boy days. His face was rugged, hard, the face of a tough minded executive. And tough he was. The secret of his success was simple. He was completely ruthless in his dealings. If a man had to be disposed of — so be it.

He actually led two lives. To most of the people of Miami, he was Jim Delany, public spirited citizen who owned the ten story Delany Building and ran the successful Delany Export-Import Business. In the drug circles he was Big J whose sleet jets brought millions of dollars worth of cocaine, pot, heroin and variations of same into the country for the syndicate. His legal business had made him rich but the take was chicken feed compared to the tax free income from the drugs. And Big Jim was greedy. All competition in the area had been stifled—by whatever means necessary.

AS HE STOOD AT THE WINDOW OF HIS LAVISH OFFICE ON THE fifth floor of the Delany Building, he suddenly felt like smiling out the window at the Florida coastline. He had a right to smile. The latest shipment of cocaine had come in without a hitch, riding under a cargo of fresh fruit. Even as he stood there, the stuff was being cut and parcelled for sale on the street. Yes, he had an efficient operation going. Only a damn fool would get hooked on drugs. He would never hire a man who took the stuff.

He lighted a cigar and after brushing some debris off of his tailored brown sport coat, walked to the office door, opened it and stood for a moment looking at the busty, attractive Millie, his latest hire. Right now, she was a receptionist, but he had big plans for her.

She looked up suddenly from her typewriter and smiled. "You want something, Mr. Delany?"

His eyes were fixed on her low-cut blouse. "You bet. Sometime I want to have a talk with you about your future in the company."

"Any time," she smiled, giving her blonde head a shake.

"Look, I'm expecting this guy in — Ruff Cady. He's a pilot looking for a job. You send him in right away."

"Yes, sir."

He took another look at the bosom and returned to his office. He was married and had two children, but he liked to fool around on the side.

He sat down at his desk and re-read the computer readout on Cady: Vietnam Vet, Air Force trained, kicked out after caught running hash. Pilots, good ones, were hard to get. Most of them were so damned honest! Here was a guy who might just fit in the organization.

Millie looked in. "Here's Mr. Cady."

Delany rose. "Send him in."

CADY WAS A CHUNKY, BEARDED MAN WITH BLACK HAIR, brown eyes. His pug nose gave him a bulldog appearance. He was wearing casual brown pants and a leather jacket.

Delany eyed him for a moment. "How many MIGs did you shoot down?" he asked finally.

"Four," was the prompt reply. "Maybe five."

"You a good pilot?"

"Damn good," Cady said. "I can fly anything — anywhere."

"How come you applied for a job here?"

"Money."

"You know, Cady, flying for me is just a truck driver's job. You carry cargo from point A to point B, and you don't ask questions about the cargo."

Cady grinned. "I know all about that — from Jose Navarone."

A frown appeared on Delany's face. "Navarone? Down in Mexico City? He's dead."

"Yeah, I know. I had a couple of drinks with him a week or so before he had that auto accident. He told me to look you up if I wanted a job."

Delany nodded. "I see. Too bad about Navarone — one of our best

contact men. Okay — like they say in the Navy, we run a tight ship. You follow orders to the letter. No going into business for yourself. No sticking your hand in the till. Keep your nose clean and you'll make good money."

"I get the picture," smiled Cady.

"What were you doing down in Mexico, Cady?" The question was abrupt.

"I flew a load of pot into Texas for a guy."

"Who?"

Cady shook his head. "I don't know. I just landed the plane and left it. A week later I got my ten grand."

Delany sniffed. "Ten grand — chicken feed." He handed Cady the computer read-out. "I got an electronic brain upstairs. Everybody in my organization is on it — just so we don't forget about them." He paused. "Now, I got a guy I want you to meet."

Delany walked to the office door. "Millie — send in the Dummy." He turned and walked back to the desk. "This guy was one of our best pilots — doing great — until we found out he'd been doing business on the side. On a trip from A to B, he'd stop off at C, sell some of the stuff, make up the weight with four, then go to B. He got away with it for awhile because the Custom creeps were giving us a hard time and nobody had time to check the stuff. Then, one day, one of the customers complained we were sending cut stuff. We did a little checking and even followed him in another plane. I figure he got into us for about two million before we caught him."

A tall, thin man with a sallow face and dull eyes walked in. He was wearing dungarees, tattered white shirt. In one hand he carried a broom and in the other, a teddy bear.

Delany grinned. "Hi, Dummy."

The man's slack mouth moved to emit a grunt.

Delany looked at Cady. "You see — I got working for me. a bunch of ex-fighters and wrestlers who are hooked on dope. They're my security force. So, when we got the goods on this guy, we invited him to a little party given by the security force."

Cady stared at the apparition. "How come they didn't kill him?"

"Somebody called the cops — too much noise."

"But — why — ?"

"Do I keep him around?" finished Delany. "They beat him up so bad that his brain's gone. The shrink says he's back to the mentality of a five year old. So — I keep him around. Maybe someday we'll find



out where that two million is stashed. He sweeps up, takes out trash — the boys at City Hall tell me I'm doing a fine thing for him. Keeps him out of a nut house. And — I make sure all the new hires meet him." He eyed Cady knowingly. "You don't ever want to be invited to one of them parties."

"I sure in Hell don't."

"Good. Dummy, go get a lollypop. You know where they are."

The man grinned foolishly and shuffled over to a cabinet.

Cady shook his head slowly. "And he used to be a pilot?"

"One of the best," Delany said. "He could land a plane on the edge of a knife."

Cady nodded as he watched the ex-pilot select a red lollypop from a box and stick it in his mouth.

Delany punched him lightly on the arm and grinned. "Come on, Cady, you keep your nose clean and you ain't got no worries. We're going upstairs now and have lunch with the key men in the company. The office help will all be gone so we can really get to know each other. You'll meet a couple of pilots — chemists — ." He turned to Dummy. "Okay, you can get the Hell outa here now, Dummy."

The tall man shuffled out of the office.

Delany laughed. "See you later, Dummy."

Cady pointed to a spot under the desk. "The Dummy left his Teddy Bear."

"Geez —! He's been doing that lately. Getting worse." He shrugged. "Leave it. He can get it later."

They headed upstairs.

TEN MINUTES LATER, A RADIO MUSIC PROGRAM WAS INTERRUPTED by the terse voice of a news announcer.

"JUST MOMENTS AGO THE DELANY BUILDING WAS DESTROYED BY A HUGE EXPLOSION ON THE FIFTH FLOOR. BIG JIM DELANY WAS KILLED ALONG WITH MOST OF HIS ASSOCIATES. THE BUILDING AND EQUIPMENT ARE A COMPLETE LOSS. FIREMEN ARE PRESENTLY —"

A tall, sallow-faced man and an attractive blonde were listening in a speeding cab. The girl turned and smiled at her companion.

"You forgot your Teddy Bear."

He grinned, then spoke with difficulty. "So I did — Millie — So I did."

8. Holmes got his violin:
- a) from a pawnbroker      b) as a gift from the King of Bohemia
  - c) from Irene Adler      d) from Watson as a birthday present
9. The first-published story about Sherlock Holmes was:
- a) The Hound of the Baskervilles      b) A Study in Scarlet
  - c) A Scandal in Bohemia      d) The Valley of Fear
10. Holmes said that a man who smells of iodoform must be:
- a) a member of the medical profession      b) an undertaker
  - c) a man with few close friends      d) a criminologist
11. In underworld parlance, a cracksman was:
- a) a sharpshooter      b) a smart alec
  - c) a burglar      d) an undercover policeman
12. Professor James Moriarty died:
- a) in bed, of old age      b) at Reichenbach Falls
  - c) in the Tower of London      d) from an overdose of cocaine
13. What did Watson call "that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained"?
- a) the Bastille      b) the Thames      c) 221-B Baker Street      d) London
14. The Baker Street Irregulars were:
- a) street urchins used by Holmes      b) women of easy virtue
  - c) off-duty constables      d) Watson's patients
15. Silver Blaze was:
- a) the name of the Baskerville hound
  - b) a showgirl infatuated with Holmes
  - c) a racing horse
  - d) Watson's pet name for his wife

Answers on page 37

# Sherlock Holmes QUIZ

1. To Sherlock Holmes she was always *the* woman. Who was she?  
a) Mrs. Hudson   b) Mary Morstan   c) Irene Adler   d) Lily Langtry
2. By profession, Irene Adler was:  
a) a fashion model   b) a courtesan   c) a journalist   d) an opera singer
3. Mary Morstan was:  
a) Mycroft's god-daughter   b) one of Dr. Watson's wives  
c) a member of the red-headed league   d) Sherlock Holmes' cousin
4. Mrs. Hudson was:  
a) Watson's typist   b) Moriarty's girl friend  
c) an Eskimo spy   d) Holmes' landlady
5. "The Dynamics of an Asteroid" was written by:  
a) Sherlock Holmes   b) Dr. John H. Watson  
c) Professor Moriarty   d) Colonel Sebastian Moran
6. Watson's favorite tobacco mixture was:  
a) Utica Club   b) Arcadia   c) Matt's Premium   d) Saquoit
7. Holmes' violin was a:  
a) Stradivarius   b) Bandini  
c) Yamaha   d) Fister-Liltz

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*There she was. A blonde whose decapitated head stared  
up at me from the trash bin!*

# Godiva's Last Walk

by THOM MONTGOMERY

GLORIA GODIVA, SHE WAS KNOWN AS. THE HOTTEST NUMBER to bump and grind her way up from obscurity to the sleezy stardom of top billing at the Sheik and Chic Inn in Studio City. If she had another name nobody knew it. So Gloria Godiva it was — a hefty, blonde number who could have come to California from almost anywhere in the Midwest. A blonde who danced topless, shaking her boobs and chewing gum in the best Tijuana tradition. A blonde whose decapitated head stared up at me from the trash bin.

I had been rummaging around to see if the bar had thrown out anything a down-and-out, not-a-nickel-to-his-name wino could use or convert into cheap wine. I'd just pushed aside three or four boxes that had once contained the best stuff a considerate God had ever thought

of, when I noticed one that had its lid closed.

"Hey," I grinned, "maybe old Tom's found himself something to keep out the cold."

I grabbed the box and was just about to lift its pleasant heftiness into my arms when the bottom fell out.

And there she was. Her head anyway. It sort of rolled over and looked up at me, like a dog, a funny, round, blonde-haired dog, with big blue eyes, a curvy kind of nose, and an ugly reddish brown smear all over the hacked neck.

I didn't race for a cop. When you're a drunk and as well known to the cops in Studio City as I am, not even a bodiless head will send you for the cops. I gagged first, adding to the bin's grisly contents. Then I dropped the now-empty carton, which I'd held on to for some dumb reason.

Then I walked away, looking around the alley nervously to see if anyone might be around. No one was. I exited, as the fuzz would say, from the alley to Lankershim Boulevard. I walked almost steadily down Lankershim. That was a mistake. I passed the front of the Sheik and Chic. Gloria Godiva stared at me from the poster out front.

"Sorry, kid," I said to myself.

I went on, back to the junky flop house hotel I was currently staying in, thanks to a recent bout of luck at the pawn shop. I'd fixed an old radio so it would play. At least long enough to hock it.

AS I CAME THROUGH THE DOOR MRS. PIERCE, THE LAND-lady, spotted me. "Gotcher rent for next week?" she asked. Anxious old bird. "Gotta pay in advance, you know. Can't afford to play banker for ya. Rent's coming due."

I gave her my Barrymore stare. "Shut up, ya old bag. I'll have it when it's due."

"It's due Sattiday," she screeched as I walked up the stairs. "And I want a little respect outta ya!"

I didn't listen to her. I was thinking of a blonde head in a trash bin . . .

The papers had it the next morning. The news, not the head. "DANCER MURDERED" read the *Times*. "STARLET FOUND MUTILATED" read the *Herald-Examiner*. Only the *Examiner* ran pictures.

California's a crazy place. The simple decapitation of a moderately pretty girl doesn't rate too much space in the papers, or too much time

in the police department. It makes for gossip at the coffee shops and in bars for a night or two.

For me it was a full week of nightmares. I didn't even drink. I had a broken television I'd dragged in from the junkyard some nights before, and I worked on it, finally getting it to show a picture and give out sound. I hocked it for twenty bucks, enough to pay for another week at Mrs. Pierce's Ritz Palace, with a couple bucks left over.

But even that didn't make me feel better.

What I needed was booze. I just didn't have much stomach for scavenging. I was afraid I might find Godiva's pink arms.

A WEEK TO THE DAY, I GOT UP ENOUGH COURAGE TO GO OUT again. There was a pretty good trash bin near a little market which sometimes had a few vegetables hardly spoiled at all. I thought I'd hit that, being hungrier than ten horses. I had to pass the Sheik and Chic to get to it though. I decided to walk on the other side of the street.

I waited until just after dark. The market closed at six, and they spent an hour or so cleaning up and getting ready for the next day. By seven-fifteen, I figured they'd have their trash out. At seven-thirty I left my room and walked to Lankershim. I crossed with the light and walked south. As I got even with the Sheik and Chic, I looked over, automatically. Now there is one thing about this neighborhood that has been true ever since I've been in California. Nobody parks a Cadillac here after dark. Maybe pass through on their way to fancy business and fancier nightspots, but park here, never.

So I did a double take when I saw the Cadillac parked in Godiva's first resting place. The alley, not the bin.

I crossed over and looked closer at the Cadillac. It was a beauty. And on the front seat was a brief case.

So alright, so sometimes I do more than just scavenge around. The door wasn't locked. Cadillac owners don't think too much about locking doors. They feel secure.

This one was about to get shook. I opened the door and copped the case. I figured I could get back to my room without anyone seeing me or thinking too much about a grizzled, middle-aged guy looking shabby and carrying a fancy black leather brief case.

I was right. Not even Mrs. Pierce spotted me. Or so I thought.

The brief case was a bummer. I mean, there wasn't much of anything in it, just papers. Still, I figured I could get a few bucks for the case itself.

THAT'S WHY I WAS WHISTLING WHEN I LEFT MY ROOM AGAIN that evening. And not being too careful. I was thinking that as soon as the hock shop opened, I'd hit Charlie up for top dollar on that case. Charlie's got a hard heart, but he can always be talked around to a decent price if you're a regular customer. And with Charlie, I'm regular.

The Cadillac was gone when I passed the alley. I crossed Lankershim toward the market, and swung through the alley. At Lankershim and Vanowen, the alley isn't too bad as alleys go. I mean, it doesn't have that truck gas and garbage smell to it. Not until you get directly behind the market, when the aroma is ripe sometimes.

It was ripe that night. That meant good news for me. I'd be bound to find something.

I started rummaging through the bin, was almost halfway into it, when I heard it. The Cadillac, not the bin. It was moving fast, and though its engine had a purr that wouldn't waken a pussy cat, the alley has chug holes, and the Cad's tires made a whumping noise as they hit.

It was mighty goddamned close. I jerked straight up by reflex. Doing it, I saw the Cadillac coming down on me. Doing ninety, it looked like.

The market's trash bin is on rollers. I pushed against it, and together we rolled just out of the way as the Cadillac whistled by, the air from its passing blowing a hot flash against my body.

I'm a drunk, not a nitwit. You gotta have a lot of savvy to survive on the skids. I knew one thing. That Cadillac was after me, and it was the same one I'd copped the brief case from.

Which meant the well groomed driver must have spotted me, and followed me.

But what sort of nut would kill a guy who'd copped a lousy brief case?

A murdering nut.

Maybe the sort of nut that cuts up dancer/starlets and leaves their heads in old trash bins. Maybe there was some connection. But why would he connect me with the head?

It had to be just the brief case. Nobody had been around when I found the head, and I sure hadn't told anybody about it.

The Cadillac was out of the alley, and I could see its tail disappearing down the Lankershim entrance. I didn't know if he was going to swing

around and come through again or not, but I decided cowardice was in order. For me, not him. So I ran, stumbled and panted my way out the same way the Cadillac had gone.

He was waiting for me. About ten feet from the alley the smart son of a buck had pulled to the curb. He was standing by the passenger door of his car.

"Want a ride, mister," he asked with a cold smile.

Since he had a gun in his hand, and was aiming it at me, I decided I wouldn't walk tonight. And maybe not ever again.

"Uh," I said, "Sure. Why not? Where to?"

"I think we'd better go to your room at your hotel."

I DIDN'T SAY A WORD ALL THE WAY. THE GUY DIDN'T EITHER. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was well fed, a real well-fed specimen. His dark hair looked like he went to a hair dresser, not a barber. Every week. Maybe every morning. His face was almost puffy. But he'd been a good looking dude in his day, which I figured to have been about ten years before.

Except us, there was nothing in the Cadillac. Not a scrap of paper, not a bit of dust. Not even cigarettes. The ash tray was closed, but I knew if it was open, there wouldn't be a thing in it.

Real class. But a boozier, like me. I could see it in his fingers and his face. Funny how you can tell. I mean, liquor bloats a man like nothing else.

I said a half prayer that Mrs. Pierce would see us as we got out of the Cadillac. Knowing her, she'd think I'd stolen it, and call the cops. She's that type. But then, walking in with the guy who had on a swank suit with a shiny revolver under the coat in his hand and pointed at me, I knew Mrs Pierce wouldn't call the cops. If she saw us, she'd think I had maybe gotten a job or something, driving a guy around.

"Room number?" my threatening acquaintance said.

"Two Oh Five" I answered. "It's toward the rear. It's not much," I added for some reason.

"The brief case there?" he asked.

"Yeah. And the papers."

That startled him, and for half a second I thought he was going to use the gun right there in the lobby by the drooping potted plastic palm. He didn't, though. He just got grim. You wouldn't believe how grim he got.

My belly did a flop. "I didn't read nothin'," I said with a dry voice.



"I mean, I don't know what's there or nothin'. I was just emptying it. Looking for stuff to sell. Or something. Not papers."

"Shut up," he said. "It doesn't matter."

It suddenly mattered to me. "My God, I want a drink," I said.

He said nothing back.

"I've got a little whiskey left," I commented, as I opened my room door. "Okay if I have a drink? You can have one, too," I added hopefully.

He walked into the room and spotted the brief case by the bed and the papers on the floor. "Put everything onto the bed," he told me, "then move away."

I laid everything on the bed. "Okay if I get a drink now?" I said in a husky voice.

"Sure. Only don't make any fast moves. Just stay cool, buster."

Cool I wasn't. I went to the dresser and poured myself a whiskey from the bottle I kept in the bottom drawer. It tasted good going down. My acquaintance was sitting on the edge of the bed, putting his papers and that envelope back into the brief case.

He wasn't watching me when he picked up the envelope. I saw a queer smile cross his lips. I threw the now empty bottle at his head.

It broke against his temple.

Like I say, I'm a drunk, not a nitwit.

He sort of sagged sadly, hesitating only a moment. Then he just tumbled over onto the floor, his gun clattering and spinning a couple of feet away.

"I heard that," Mrs. Pierce hollered from the lobby downstairs. "You and your fancy friend keep the noise down."

"Yeah, sure, sweetheart," I hollered back as I crossed over to the unconscious body on my floor. "And up yours, too," I added.

I looked at the guy, and then went to the brief case and picked up the manila envelope. It felt like it held sticks. I squeezed them through the paper. They were very flexible for sticks. Soft, yet underneath hard.

Drunks like me don't usually call the cops. This time I did. With what was almost my last dime. I'm not such a good citizen, but I figured it was better to explain how I came to have the guy's brief case, than it was to face him when he woke up. And I knew the fuzz would want to open that little brown envelope.

I GOT NO REWARD. WHAT I GOT WAS A GRILLING WHEN THE cops showed up. They hauled me down to the station, and I told every-

body there how I'd got the brief case and why I'd thrown my whiskey bottle at the sleeping beauty.

They believed me. They didn't make it easy on me. But at the end of it, all I really got was a warning, and Louie, the guy who's booked me more times than I care to dream about, called me a bum, told me not to show my face around the bars for awhile, until after the trial.

William Howard's trial, that is. That was the guy I'd conked with my whiskey bottle.

Those little sticks were exactly what I'd figured they were. Gloria Godiva's fingers.

Some souvenir.

Howard not only drank, he took dope. The heavy stuff. And he took women, the heavy kind, the kind that like to play rough little sex games, with him being the rough one, and them being the roughed-up ones. Only Gloria didn't go along with him.

He almost got her, but she got mad, and she walked off from him. It was the wrong time of month. Full moon. Sun in the wrong part of the zodiac. Whatever. He got loaded on H, went to her pad, and took care of her body in his own way. They found the rest of her in his freezer. He'd planned on dropping her off at one place after another a piece at a time.

Only he'd wanted to go down to the Sheik and Chic just once. To see where she'd done her act, maybe. Who knows how these nuts operate when they're tripping out?

He'd spotted me walking away, and he'd followed me, waiting for his chance.

It would have gone okay, if he'd only thrown those fingers away before he stopped for a last look at the Sheik and Chic.

Between me and Godiva, we'd fingered him.

When the police were done with me, I walked back to my room. Mrs. Pierce had my stuff out in the lobby. "I don't like having the cops around," she said. "So move."

"Yeah sure," I told her with a snarl. "And up yours, too, lady," I added, picking up my suitcase.

"I want a little respect," she hollered after me as I walked down Lankershim.

There was a little park down there where I could sleep that night and not be spotted by the cops. And I could pawn my suitcase with Charlie the next day. I'd get a couple for that.



# Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS  
by JOHN BALL

Ever since they first began to appear, Arthur Upfield's stories of Australia have been acclaimed, even to the point that they have become assigned reading in some universities. All of them are now hard to find, but four early works are virtually impossible. One of these is *The House of Cain*, a mystery without Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, but a tremendous find for any Upfield collector. It is now available again. Originally published in 1928 in London, it has just been reprinted by Dennis McMillan. Because this is an early Upfield effort it does not display the mastery that was to follow, but at this point who cares. You can get your copy from Mr. McMillan, whose address is 1353 4th Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94122. The price is \$20.00 for a very nicely produced copy in dust jacket.

Also, two of the very best of the novels Upfield wrote about his half-white, half-aborigine detective are freshly available in paperback. They are *Murder Down Under*, which is a masterpiece, and *Death of a Lake*, one of the best detective novels of all time. If you don't have these titles in your library, don't fail to get them while they're still available. (Scribners, \$3.95 (Murder) and \$2.95 (Lake) )

☆ ☆ ☆

Andrew Taylor makes his debut as a novelist with *Caroline Minuscule*, an unlikely name for a murder mystery. It refers to a certain kind of medieval script. When a leading authority on it is garrotted, a delightfully unprincipled graduate student and his girlfriend look into the matter and encounter some very nasty people who are after a large cache of diamonds. Of course the script holds the clue to where they are. After this we are off to the races and the ending holds a neat surprise. (Dodd Mead, \$12.95)

Elliot Chaze, who is well remembered for *The Stainless Steel Kimono*, has an engaging tale of murder in the small newspaper world in his latest novel *Goodbye Goliath*. When a local newspaper is purchased by a chain, they send in their own man to run it. He proves to be impossible and a brute in the bargain, so the only question that remains is when is he going to be murdered and how. Following his anticipated demise the case drags on for a surprisingly long time while the usual vicissitudes of getting out a daily paper go on. Someone sabotages the huge press, but the dogged city editor keeps things going and eventually the killer is discovered. The book is made more interesting by some of the refreshing people who inhabit the city room. (Scribners, \$11.95)



When medieval monk/herbologist/detective Brother Cadfael made his debut in *A Morbid Taste For Bones* he was an immediate success. Author Ellis Peters re-created the times in which he lived with dedicated skill and told an engaging tale in the bargain. The good Brother and his poppy syrup nostrum have since reappeared and now he is here again in *The Virgin in the Ice*. He was never better; from the very beginning there is plenty of atmosphere, action, and excitement as well as some grand story telling. Miss Peters has a special aptitude for creating remarkable heroines and she has done so again here. Also, you will learn something more about the Brother's very active life before he entered holy orders. A complete delight. (Morrow, \$11.95)



Where would we be in this business were it not for the English village setting for murder most foul! Miss Marple is no longer on hand, but there are other villages, other detectives. As for example Chief Inspector Kelsey and Detective Sergeant Lambert who are called upon to solve the cruel dispatch of a popular but reclusive young woman in Emma Page's *Last Walk Home*. As is true of so many similar books, the pace is a bit slow, but the background is solid and the people live from the printed page. Not a barn burner, but a good, agreeable read. (Walker and Co., \$12.95)



Next village — next murder: *A Little Local Murder* by Robert Barnard. This time the English country village is to be featured on TV.

Everyone wants to be on the show and naturally some tempers flair. One of the most determined and pushy candidates for the limelight is conveniently done in. Poison pen letters begin to circulate as the police go to work. Mr. Barnard has a notably superior writing ability, one which allows him to produce witty prose and deft characterizations with a tongue in cheek flair. He definitely does so here and you'll love every minute of it. (Scribners, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Quite possibly inspired by Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael, E.M.A. Allison, a husband and wife team, writes about murder in a monastery in 1379 in *Through the Valley of Death*. When a monk with a highly colorful past is done in, pious Brother Barnabas is called upon to solve the crime. He is an innocent and inexperienced man, interested only in his holy duties. He takes on his assignment and discharges it, but not without a considerable sacrifice of his own tranquility. The pace is slower than in *The Virgin in the Ice* by Miss Peters, but the idea of the reluctant detective is interestingly used. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver is always engaging reading; she is back in *Miss Silver Comes to Stay* by Bantam at \$2.25 . . . Walker's paperback series of British mysteries has just added *Unhappy Returns* by Elizabeth Lemarchand, *The Lord Mayor of Death* by Marion Babson and *Help From the Baron* by John Creasey. They are uniformly priced at \$2.95 . . . Perennial's library of classic reprints has added *Too Much Water* by Bruce Hamilton and *For Old Crime's Sake* by Delano Ames. Both are \$2.95. This is a most impressive series . . . Bob Randisi introduces Miles Jacoby in an Avon original, *Eye in the Ring*, \$2.75 . . . The new Avon reprints are Joyce Harrington's *Family Reunion* at \$2.95 and Richard Shaw's *Lamprey's Legacy* at \$2.75 . . . Another Avon original worthy of attention is *Clandestine* by James Ellroy, the story of a California cop written vividly in the first person, \$2.95 . . . Pocket Books has reprinted John Kruse's *Red Omega*, a taut thriller about international intrigue at \$3.50 . . . Supernatural evil is loose again, this time in the Pocket Book original *Someone's Watching* by Andrew Neiderman, \$3.50 . . . Lastly, Penguin has reprinted *We, the Accused* by Ernest Raymond. If you follow the excellent series MYSTERY on public TV, you will recognize this title immediately. It's recommended and yours for \$3.95.

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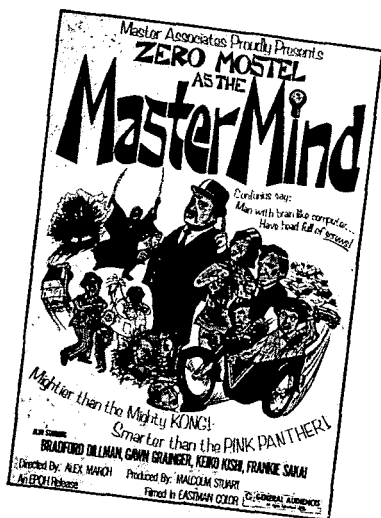
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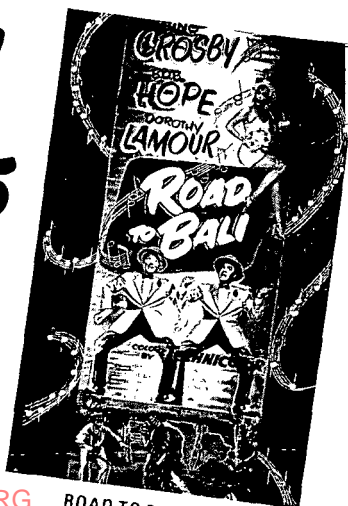


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